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ESTELLA'S HUSBAND;

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OR,

THRICE LOST, THRICE WON.

BY

MAY AGNÈS FLEMING,

AUTHOR OF

“THE UNSEEN BRIDEGROOM,” “LADY EVELYN,” “WHO WINS?”
“THE HEIRESS OF GLEN GOWER,”
“THE BARONET’S BRIDE,” “MAGDALEN’S VOW,” ETC.

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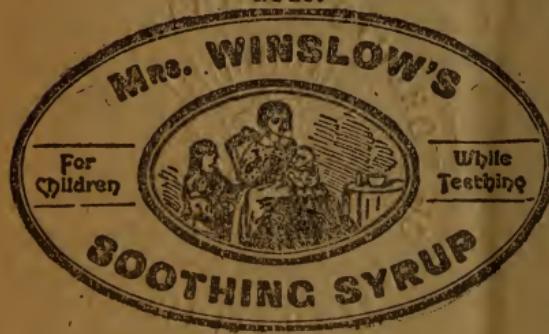
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ESTELLA'S HUSBAND.

CHAPTER I.

ROYSTEN DARRELL.

A LONG, low room, paneled in black walnut, the dim day-light stealing in through the high, narrow windows, gloomy and dark, and almost unfurnished. A few stiff-backed wooden chairs, primly arranged, round the walls, a deal table, covered with oil-cloth, in the middle of the floor, a stony-hearted old horse-hair sofa—nothing more. In a huge gulf of a fire-place, wide enough to hold yule logs at Christmas-time, a fire of green wood sputtered and smoked viciously, and failed to lighten or heat the somber room.

It was an afternoon early in May, but a chill wind blew rawly over the sea, and drifted the rain ceaselessly against the narrow windows. A hopelessly wet and windy afternoon, with a low-lying black sky, frowning down on a moaning black sea, and with trees tossing drearily in the wailing, desolate blast. Desolate without, desolate within, the one occupant of that eerie chamber paced up and down, up and down, with all the gloom of the weather shadowed darkly in his face.

An old man, bent, and withered, and wrinkled, with scanty gray locks straggling from under a rusty old skull-cap, and a face seamed and drawn into innumerable furrows. From under bushy gray brows two keen eyes twinkled, and the long, lean hands, clasped behind his back, were hooked like the talons of a bird of prey.

He stopped short in his restless walk suddenly, at the sound of a loud-voiced clock, somewhere outside, striking sonorously four.

“Four o'clock,” muttered the old man, angrily, “and he told Simpson he would be here directly. Some people would dawdle, I believe, though the crown of the world

awaited them. And yet, Roysten Darrell is not one of that sort, either."

He walked to one of the windows and looked out. There were six windows to the long, antique room, three looking east, over a bare expanse of desolate marsh and swampy meadow land, and three looking west, over a bleak, circular beach and illimitable waste of sea. Through one of these western windows the old man gazed at the lonesome prospect—at the long, forsaken shore, at the rain-beaten ocean.

Far away to the right you caught a glimpse of a straggling village; far away to the left spread out the sodden marshes and bare, windy beach. No living thing was to be seen, but about a mile distant, rising and falling on the long groundswell, a low, dark schooner lay at anchor within a sheltered curve of the circular shore.

"Ay," said the old man, apostrophizing this piratical-looking craft, "there you lie—black bird of ill-omen—rightly named the 'Raven.' There you lie, black and forbidding! and many a dark deed has been done on your polished deck, and many a foul crime, I dare say, has your gloomy hulk hidden. There you lie, you black buccaneer! fitting craft to be commanded by reckless Roysten—by Dare-devil Darrell. And yet there are worse scoundrels out yonder in the world than the mad-headed smuggler captain—fortune-hunters, with glib tongues and polished manners; and ten to one but the girl may fall a victim to one of them, if I let her go. Better marry Roysten Darrell than one of those black-hearted hypocrites. Whatever he is—give the devil his due—I don't think it is in him to be unkind to a woman."

He walked away from the window to the table, took up a letter lying there, and read it over slowly, from beginning to end—a long letter, written in a delicate, spidery hand, and signed "Helen Mallory."

He laid it down, after his slow perusal, seated himself before the sputtering fire, and gazed thoughtfully into its smoky heart.

"And to think he should turn up at last—after over sixteen years, and claim his child. To think that he should be a nobleman and a millionaire—to think that this girl, half educated, half civilized, brought up by old Peter Fisher, should have the wonderful *sang azuré* of the old

régime in her veins, and be this French nabob's sole heiress! It is like a fairy tale or a melodrama; it is like nothing in real life. Ha! that knock! Reckless Roysten at last."

A thundering knock, that made the lonely old house vibrate, came to the front door. The old man smiled grimly as he heard it.

"It is characteristic of the man—Dare-devil Darrell's knock the wide world over. Big, blundering, impetuous giant! Ten to one but he refuses to make his fortune, after all."

A slip-shod footstep was heard straggling along the low passage, a chain was slipped, a key turned, and the house door opened. Directly after there was a scuffle in the passage, and a boisterous bass laugh.

"My Hebe! my idol!" cried this boisterous voice. "My lovely Judith, do I again behold thee? Never squirm or wriggle, my fair one, but give me a kiss, and have done with it."

Here there was a struggle, and a sounding slap, followed by a second jovial laugh.

"It's like your impudence, Captain Darrell," exclaimed a shrill female voice. "If I'd a-knowned it was you, you might a-knocked the door down afore I'd have opened it. Let me alone, I tell you, or I'll scratch your eyes out."

A man's step came bounding up the stairs—each stride making them creak with his weight; then the door was flung open, and Captain Roysten Darrell, of the schooner "Raven," stood before old Peter Fisher.

A magnificent monster—a giant of six feet three, with the thews and sinews and muscles of a gladiator—the build of a Farnese Hercules, and the symmetry of an Apollo Belvedere. A kingly head, crowned with a glorious aureole of red-brown hair; magnificent beard and mustache of the same leonine hue; a broad, white forehead; two brilliant blue eyes, full of laughing light; a symmetrical nose, and a ruddy complexion well browned by exposure to freezing winds and tropic suns. An overgrown Adonis—a human lion, a superb specimen of muscular Christianity—aged seven-and-twenty years.

The old man wheeled round in his chair, and eyed the big captain of the "Raven" with a grim stare.

"At last, Roysten Darrell! You have kept me waiting,

and I hate people who make me wait. You told Simpson you would follow him directly, and Simpson has been back over an hour."

"Simpson may go hang!" responded Roysten Darrell, politely, "and you, too, my Ancient Mariner, if it comes to that. Do you suppose I have nothing else to do, when ashore, than dancing attendance upon you and Simpson? It was touch-and-go my getting here at all, most worthy old buffer. I had other fish to fry, I can tell you. But here I am; and now, what the deuce do you want in such a hurry?"

"To make your fortune, Roysten Darrell, little as you deserve it. So try and keep a civil tongue in your head. You're not on the deck of the 'Raven' now, remember, and Peter Fisher isn't one of your slaves."

"Make my fortune, eh?" repeated Captain Darrell, coolly. "Why don't you make your own first, Mr. Fisher? This old rookery of yours will tumble about your ears one of these days. Take a little of the fortune you are going to make for me and repair it. Have you found the Philosopher's Stone, or Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp, or a crucible to turn all metals into gold? or have you come upon a buried treasure, or what? I have no objection to have my fortune made, and it's slow work making it in the 'Raven.' The revenue cutters were within an ace of having me, crew and cargo, this last time."

"They'd have had you long ago, if you had been an honester man; but Satan is good to his own. However, your fortune is made, and within your grasp now, if you choose to reach out your hand and take it."

"Then, by Jove, I choose! Just have the goodness to explain yourself a little."

The old man leaned forward, and his keen, ferret eyes peered sharply into the brilliant blue orbs of the stalwart captain.

"Roysten Darrell, have you any objection to a wife?"

"Not the least in life! To a dozen, if you choose. Have you found me one?"

"I have—an heiress—a millionaire's only child."

"Good! It has been the ambition of my life to marry a millionaire's daughter. But where is she? I didn't know millionaires existed over in yon big fishing village of Rockledge."

"No more do they. She isn't in Rockledge; she is here, in this house."

"Thousand thunders!" cried Roysten Darrell, in his boisterous voice. "You don't mean old Judith? By Jupiter! I'm not of a fastidious stomach in these matters, but I'll be hanged if I could bring myself to such a pitch as that. No, my worthy old crony," said the captain of the "Raven," making a wry face, "if Judith is your heiress, you'll allow me to decline. Much obliged to you, though, all the same."

"Don't be a fool, Darrell!" exclaimed Peter Fisher, angrily, "and don't lift the roof with that big voice of yours. I don't mean Judith, you know as well as I do; I mean Estella Mallory."

"What! Little Estella? But, *mon ami*, she's only a child."

"She's over sixteen years, Captain Darrell, and a good-looking, well-grown girl. You objected to age a moment ago—now you object to youth. Pray what will you have?"

"I'll have little Estella with all the pleasure in life. The question is, will Estella have me? She scuds, like a frightened deer, at the first glimpse of me."

"No wonder, with your rough ways, and your thunderous voice, and your ponderous six foot three. But I'll make that all right—she'll do whatever I tell her, or I'll know the reason why. And you'll marry her? Give me your hand on that, Roysten Darrell."

The captain of the "Raven" stretched out his big brown paw, and gave one of the lean talons a grip that made the old man wince.

"I'll marry her fast enough, and every other pretty girl from Maine to Florida, if you like. But where's your heiress? where's your millionaire? I thought little Estella was an orphan."

"So did I until within the last day or two, when a letter comes and tells me her papa has most unexpectedly turned up. He is a French nobleman, worth a mint of money, and Estella—when he finds her—is his heiress and only child."

"A marvelous tale," said Captain Darrell; "so marvelous, my old friend, that I can't swallow it at the first gulp. Who is this Estella Mallory (Mallory hasn't a very French sound, by the way), and how does old Peter Fisher, of Fisher's Folly, come to be the adopted father of French

noblemen's daughters? You'll excuse my curiosity, but if I'm to marry the young lady, it strikes me I should like to know something of her antecedents."

" You shall know all," said Peter Fisher. " Her mother, Estella Mallory (yes, the girl bears her mother's name, not her father's), eloped at the age of eighteen with an unknown foreigner, her music teacher—a poor devil, with nothing but a handsome face, a black mustache, and a high-sounding name—an exile. Whether she was his wife or not did not appear, and the Mallory family—proud as the—as your best friend, Captain Darrell—were shocked and horrified, and scandalized beyond everything. How she spent the first year of her union with Monsieur Hautville does not appear—wretchedly enough, I infer, in poverty and loneliness. The first thing that is known of her, she turns up here—she comes to me in her misery and utter friendliness for shelter and succor. I had known pretty Estella Mallory when a graceful girl of fifteen, and she came to me in preference to the home she had abandoned forever. She came in poverty and sickness, and I took her in and did my best for her. But that best could not save her life—she went to her grave, a broken-hearted woman, at the age of eighteen. In this house her child was born, and we named her after the mother that was dead and gone."

The grim old face grew a shade less grim, as he told the story—the every-day story of a woman's woe. Roysten Darrell listened intently.

" And monsieur—how do you call him? the gay deceiver—where is he?"

" In France. With the overthrow of the old dynasty, and the rise of the Napoleonic star, he went back to be reinstated in the old title and the old estates. That was all the dying girl could or would tell me; but I know she thought he had deserted her. She wore his wedding-ring, she showed me her marriage certificate—but she never looked to see his face in this world again. No letter, no message ever came—she died believing herself betrayed and deserted. And yet it seems it was not so; after sixteen years our French noble turns up and claims his child."

" How does he discover he has one?" asked Captain Darrell.

" From his dead wife's only sister and sole living rela-

tive, Helen Mallory. He returns to this country, anxious to make reparation—to own his marriage, to claim his wife. His wife he can not find—her sister he does, and learns Estella is dead and buried, and her daughter and living image lives and bears her name. He is immensely rich—he has his ancient title—he burns to behold his daughter, and claim her as his heiress. But Helen Mallory neither forgives nor forgets the past; his tardy repentance does not move her; she refuses to tell him where that daughter is to be found. ‘I will write to her guardian, M. le Comte,’ she says, coldly; ‘*you* have little claim to my dead sister’s child. I will tell Mr. Fisher what you have told me; if he is ready to resign the girl he has adopted and reared from infancy, well and good; if not—you must seek her and find her for yourself, without any clew from me.’ She keeps her word—this haughty Helen Mallory; her letter came two days ago. Monsieur the Count offers immense rewards for his heiress; he is ready to pay any sum I may demand. Here is the letter—read for yourself.”

The old man took the letter from the table and passed it to the captain of the “Raven.” Roysten Darrell read it carefully from beginning to end.

“A very nice letter and a very good turn-up for *you*! But you’ll excuse my dullness, Mr. Fisher, if I say I don’t see clearly how all this is to benefit *me*!”

“In the easiest way imaginable—as the girl’s husband. Look here, Roysten—you marry her before she knows anything of her good fortune. When this wealthy French count finds his daughter, he finds his daughter’s husband also. What belongs to your wife belongs to you; you claim her fortune, and you—share that fortune with me.”

“Exactly!” replied Captain Darrell, coolly; “and the lion’s share, too, I take it. A very charming scheme, Mr. Peter Fisher, but not altogether practicable. In the first place, little Estella won’t marry me—you’ll find she won’t—and these girls can be as determined as the deuce, when they choose. In the second place, supposing you compel her to marry me, she won’t live with me an hour after she finds her rich father. And what do you suppose that aristocratic papa will say to a son-in-law who weds his daughter, willy-nilly, after he finds out she has a fortune?”

What will M. le Comte think of you? what will he think of me?"

" Whatever he pleases. You will be her husband all the same, and it will be rather late in the day for an *esclandre*. Monsieur the Count must put up with the inevitable. At the worst, there will be a compromise and a divorce, and you will bleed the Parisian nabob to the tune of half his fortune. Half of that half you will hand over to me, and it will make us both rich for life. What do you say, Roysten Darrell—will you make a bold stroke for fortune, and marry the girl out of hand?"

Peter Fisher leaned forward, his greedy old eyes glistening.

The brilliant blue orbs of the captain met that eager gaze with imperturbable *sang froid*.

" You cold-blooded old reprobate!" he said, taking out a cigar and biting off the end. " You're a deeper-dyed villain than I am; and that is saying a good deal. You have brought up this girl from babyhood—you stand pledged to her dead mother, who trusted you, for her welfare; and here you are, bartering her off, as though she were a little slave-girl under the auctioneer's hammer. Why, you thundering old crocodile, have you no bowels of compassion? Don't you know you are trying your hardest to make her miserable for life?"

The old man listened unmoved, an evil sneer on his withered face.

" Satan turned saint! Roysten Darrell changed into a second St. Kevin! Go—there's the door! Go back to the 'Raven,' and let the revenue officers take you, and rot in prison for me. You're a greater fool than I took you to be!"

" Thank you, old messmate! I believe I *will* go, for I have business to attend to that is rather pressing. How soon is pretty little Estella to become Mrs. Roysten Darrell?"

" Ah, I thought your scruples would end in that way! You *will* marry her, then?"

" Most assuredly. Do you think me capable of refusing so small a favor to a lady? I'll marry her to-morrow, if you choose, and take her with me for a honey-moon cruise in the 'Raven.' Meantime, you can settle matters with papa, and when we return, Mrs. Darrell, heartily sick of

the sea and of matrimony, I shall be ready for that divorce and half of the millionaire's fortune. Good-evening to you, old hypocrite! Settle matters with the young lady—tell lies by the yard—I'll swear, through thick and thin, to all you assert. To-morrow, about this time, I'll be along again to hear the result."

He rose up, and swung off with his long, sailor stride.

Peter Fisher watched him out of the room, with a grim glance, and heard the house-door close after him with a bang that made him wince.

"The devil take him!" muttered the old man. "He'll smash every hinge in the house if he comes here often. If there were any other way—but there is not, and she *must* marry him. After all, a divorce will set everything right again. I will have feathered my nest, and away in France, who will be the wiser? It must be. I'll break it to her at once."

He seized a hand-bell on the table and rang a vigorous peal.

The summons was answered by a gaunt old woman, as grim, and wrinkled, and withered as her master.

"Send Estella Mallory here, Judith," her master said. "Tell her to come at once."

The gaunt domestic departed without a word, and Peter Fisher sat staring nervously into the smoky fire.

Outside, the rain beat, and the wind blew, and the dusk of the dismal spring day already darkened the dismal room.

The old man shivered as the shrill gale whistled round the lonely gables.

"After all," he muttered, "she ought to be glad to get away from this grawsome place—glad of anything for a change. Roysten Darrell's a handsome fellow, and girls all like to be married. I hope she won't object. I don't want to use force. There's a look of her dead mother in her big, brown eyes sometimes that—Oh, here she comes!"

CHAPTER II.

ESTELLA.

THERE was the quick patterning of light feet down the long, steep stairs—the last three cleared with a jump—

then the door flew open, and Peter Fisher's ward stood, brightly smiling, on the threshold.

The fire leaped up as she entered, as if brightened by her bright presence, and lighted the dusky room. The old man shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked furtively at her, thinking, in spite of himself, what a contrast she was to his late visitor—to the gigantic captain of the "Raven," and his gaunt, grim old housekeeper.

She stood before him—a tall, slender damsel, with a pale, rather thin face, and the evident consciousness of having too many arms, which it is in the nature of sixteen years to have. Great brown eyes, dark, deep-shining, lighted up this pale, girlish face—not beautiful yet, but full of the serene promise of future beauty. Beautiful eyes—now black and sparkling, now soft and glowing with amber light, reminding you of Balzac's "Girl with the Golden Eyes."

With these wondrous brown eyes went a wondrous fall of hazel hair, rippling, waving, shining, down to her slender waist—a glorious *chevelure*, that would have driven a fashionable belle wild with envy.

She stood before him there, in the fire-light, so brightly pretty that it was a pleasure only to look at her.

"Her mother's image," old Peter Fisher thought, with a little nervous tremor. "It is like seeing the ghost of the dead."

"You sent for me, Uncle Fisher?" the girl asked, in her fresh, young voice. "Judith told me you wanted to see me very particularly."

"And so I do. Come in, child, and shut the door. Take that seat—I have something very important to say to you."

The bright, brown eyes opened wide, and fixed themselves in a frank stare of astonishment on the seamed old face.

In all her sixteen years' experience, Mr. Fisher never had had anything of importance to say to her before.

The old man shifted in his chair, and leaned back further into the shadow, strangely uneasy under that clear gaze.

"Do you know how old you are, Estella?" he asked.

"Why, yes, uncle; sixteen, last March."

"Sixteen years and three months, and a young woman, Estella!"

Estella Mallory laughed—a clear, sweet laugh.

"I hope I am nothing half so stupid. A young woman! How prim and dowdyish it sounds! One is only a girl at sixteen. Time enough to be a young woman when one is two-or three-and-twenty."

"Pooh! nonsense! You're as much of a woman almost as you'll ever be—a strong, well-grown girl. Plenty of women are married before they're your age."

Miss Mallory shrugged her graceful shoulders.

"They must be in a hurry, uncle. If there's one thing more stupid and dowdyish than being a 'young woman,' it is to be married. Is this what you sent for me to talk about?"

It was quite evident Mr. Fisher's ward was not in the least awe of her grim guardian. And, indeed, you needed but look once into those bright, frank eyes to see that utter fearlessness was a characteristic of the girl's nature.

"Estella," said the old man, shifting his base, "aren't you tired of this place—of this lonely old house—of those dreary marshes—of that everlasting sea—of that stupid Rockledge?"

"Dreadfully tired, uncle—tired to death of it all, ages ago."

"And you would like to leave it, wouldn't you?" eagerly. "To travel and see the world, to visit great cities, to be your own mistress, and quit Fisher's Folly forever?"

The brown eyes dilated; the pretty lips came breathlessly apart.

"Uncle, what do you mean? Are you going to send me away? Oh!" clasping the little hands in sudden rapture, "perhaps you are going to send me to school."

"No, my—my dear. That would not be freedom—only another more irksome kind of bondage. Boarding-school girls are veritable slaves, and half-starved at that. No, no, Estella! I mean something better than that."

"Then, perhaps you are going to quit Rockledge yourself, and take me and Judith with you. That would be nice."

"Better still, Estella. Can not you guess?"

Miss Mallory shook her brown curls.

"No, uncle, I can't travel over the world alone; and, unless you are going to take me, I give it up!"

"My dear," the old man said, his voice trembling with

eagerness, "you need not go alone. A younger and handsomer man will take you. You are old enough to be married, Estella. You shall go as a bride!"

Estella Mallory gave a little, gasping cry, then sat staring in speechless astonishment.

"You like young and handsome men—don't you, my dear? All young girls do. And he's—he's very much in love with you," said Mr. Peter Fisher, bringing the words out with a gulp, "and ready to do anything under the sun for you. He will take you everywhere. To New York—and New York is a wonderful city, Estella—to foreign lands, if you wish. He will be your slave; every wish of yours will be his law. You shall have silk gowns, and gold ear-rings, and cart-loads of those novels you like so much, and everything your heart can desire. All he asks in return is that you marry him—this week."

"This week!" gasped the stricken Estella; "good gracious me! Uncle Fisher, who are you talking about?"

"About the man who loves you so much, Estella," replied Uncle Fisher, with ghastly playfulness. "Can't you guess his name?"

"Does he ever come here?"

"Yes, my dear—often."

"Then I give it up," said Estella, promptly, "for I never saw a young and handsome man inside this house in my life."

"Think, my dear—think. Try again."

"Think!" repeated Estella; "it doesn't require any thinking. There's Mr. Jacobs, the minister, *he* comes here, and he's got a bald head, and a wife and five children. There's Doctor Skinner, he drops in sometimes, and he's a widower of sixty-five, with granddaughters older than I am. There's the butcher and the grocer, they come after their bills monthly, and they're both married men, and old and ugly as original sin. There's your lawyer—old Grimshaw—with a face like a death's-head, who has buried three wives and is looking out for a fourth. Perhaps it is Mr. Grimshaw, uncle; though if you think him either young or handsome, you must be taking leave of your senses."

Mr. Fisher laughed a feeble, little laugh.

"Ha! ha! my dear; very good! But it isn't Mr. Grimshaw, nor any of those you have mentioned. Try again."

"Where's the use?" exclaimed Estella, impatiently. "I never see any one else here. I can't guess. Who is it?"

"My dear, he was here this very afternoon."

Estella Mallory gave a cry, and fairly sprung from her chair.

"Uncle! Mr. Fisher! You never mean to say you're talking of the smuggler captain—of that great, big, red-headed monster, Captain Darrell?"

"I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head, Miss Mallory!" said Peter Fisher, sharply. "Yes, I mean the captain of the 'Raven.' A young and handsome man, miss, if there ever was one yet."

"Oh!" cried Estella.

It was all she could say. She dropped back in her chair, mute with amazement.

"Captain Darrell was here this afternoon, and he wants to marry you. He'll take you on board the 'Raven' anywhere in the wide world you would like to go."

"I'd see Captain Darrell and the 'Raven' at the bottom of the Red Sea first!" burst out Estella Mallory, her pale face turning crimson with indignation; "that great, frightful, overgrown, wicked wretch! Why, if there is any one man in the whole world I have a horror of, it is that man! A smuggler—a pirate—a—"

"Silence!" thundered Peter Fisher, starting to his feet; "you bold minx, how dare you say such things of any friend of mine? Captain Darrell is a thousand times too good for you—a nameless pauper—and does you a thousand times too much honor by taking any notice of you at all."

"I don't want him to take any notice of me," responded the young lady, rather sulkily. "I hate him!"

"You shall marry him for all that. Do you think I am going to keep you on my hands forever—a burden and a drag? I always resolved you should marry the first decent man who asked you, and Roysten Darrell is the first, and you shall marry him!"

"I sha'n't!" returned Estella, with resolute defiance, "and he isn't a decent man! I know what they say of him in the village; I know how the revenue cutters chase him; I know how he killed one of his men who informed

on him two years ago—split his skull open with a crowbar; I know—”

“I know you'll get your neck twisted, or *your* skull split open, if you don't mind what you say!” shrieked the old man, in a fury. “Hold your poisonous tongue, miss, and hear me out! Roysten Darrell wants to marry you, and whether you like it, or whether you don't, marry him you shall, before you are a week older. Do you hear, Estella Mallory? Marry him you shall before another week!”

“I hear,” said Estella, getting up resolutely, “and I *won't!* No, Mr. Fisher, not if you were to kill me! I'm afraid of that man—I hate him! and I'd die a thousand times before I'd ever be a wife of his!”

“Dying is very easy in theory—very hard in practice. Young ladies of sixteen will do a good deal before they die. A week's imprisonment on bread and water will cool the fever in your blood, and bring down that high spirit a little. I won't lock you up to-night. I'll give you a last chance. But if, by to-morrow, when Captain Darrell comes here for his answer, that answer is not ‘Yes!’ up you go to the attic, there to stay among the rats and beetles until the *yes* comes!”

Estella shuddered, but walked determinedly to the door.

“Stop!” exclaimed the old man, also rising. “Hear me out! Don't think of escape. You have neither money nor friends—you stand utterly alone in the wide world, dependent on me. No one in the village will help or harbor you. You are entirely in my power, to do with as I choose. If I locked you up until the rats gnawed the flesh off your bones, and nothing but your rattling skeleton remained, who would be the wiser? Think better of it, my good girl, and when Captain Darrell comes here to-morrow, be ready to say ‘yes,’ and ‘thank you.’ Now go.”

The girl left the room without a word. In the dim light of the dusky passage she was deathly pale, but the youthful face looked fixed and resolute as doom.

She walked to a window at the end of the hall, and looked out. The rain had ceased, but the wind whistled shrilly and rent the black, jagged clouds wildly hither and thither.

The sea tossed wild and white, with a roar like thunder, and dim, and dark, and far off she could just make out

the "Raven," outlined against the gloomy sky. Either the sight, or the raw, rattling blast, made her shiver from head to foot.

"It is easier to die," she said to herself, her brown eyes looking black under her bent brows. "He is a robber and a murderer—an outlaw and a villain—a wretch for whom the gallows is waiting! Better be eaten alive by the rats up in the attic, than live an hour with *him*! But, oh! I don't understand it all. What on earth *can* he want to marry me for? I won't marry him, and I won't be locked up! You'll see, Mr. Fisher! This is Dick's night—dear, clever old Dick—and he will tell me how to outwit them both."

CHAPTER III.

DICK DERWENT PLOTS.

PETER FISHER's dreary dwelling—Fisher's Folly—stood as dismally isolated from other dwellings as a house could well stand. A long, dark, rambling old place, gloomier without than within, if possible, perched on a windy cliff overlooking the lonely sea. Far away on either hand spread the desolate marshes and arid fields, burned dry under the broiling sea-side sun. Three miles off lay Rockledge—the little country town; and the road between Rockledge and Fisher's Folly was as lonely and dismal a stretch of road as you could find in a long year's search.

Those ghastly fields—those sodden marshes, dotted with clumps of gloomy cedars—spread out unutterably grawsome after dusk, and very rare was it, indeed, to meet a human being on that deserted road once the gloaming fell.

But on this wild and windy May night, a tall young man strode cheerily along the lonesome path, whistling a lively tune. A tall and slender youth of one-or two-and-twenty, with a frank, good-looking, high-colored face, and merry, light-blue eyes. A young man on whose boyish face the callow down was just beginning to crop up in palest hues, and whose long legs measured off the ground in seven-league strides.

Under his arm he carried a bundle of books, in tattered paper covers, and as he whistled along he cast anxious glances now and then up at the overcast sky. The rain

had entirely ceased, but the wind blew a gale, and the black clouds scudded wildly before it over the stormy sky.

"A nasty night!" the young man muttered—"cold, and raw, and bleak for my dear girl to venture out. But she won't fail, bless her dear little fearless heart! She's a great deal too fond of 'yellow-covered literature' for that. I wish she were too fond of poor Dick Derwent also! But that's too good to hope for."

His whistle ended in a lugubrious sigh, and his cheery face clouded a little.

"Will she ever like me, I wonder, as I like her? Will it go on like this forever—I madly in love with her, she fond of 'dear old Dick,' as she might be fond of some big, faithful Newfoundland dog? Will my secret burst out sooner or later, and frighten the dear little innocent girl out of her senses? I'm no match for the adopted daughter of the rich old miser. I suppose she'll be an heiress when he dies, and Dick Derwent's cake will be dough. She's in love with the Corsair, Ernest Maltravers, and a dozen other heroes of that ilk, and the sub-editor of the Rockledge 'Weekly News' might as well love some 'bright particular star,' etc., as the prospective heir of old Peter Fisher. It's destiny, I suppose," concluded Mr. Dick Derwent, with a second long-drawn sigh, "but it's doosidly hard."

He strode along in gloomy meditation for the remainder of the way, and gloom was an element altogether foreign to Dick Derwent's good-humored face. But he was in love—hopelessly, helplessly in love—and surely the megrims is the normal state of hopeless lovers.

He was in love with Estella Mallory, this youthful sub-editor of the Rockledge "News," on whose boyish chin the down was still tender, and to him the glorious sun shone on nothing half so lovely as the pale, slender girl of sixteen, with the wonderful hazel eyes and hair. He was in love with the pretty Estella, and he kept his secret, and let concealment prey on his damask cheek; and he brought her flowers, and fruit, and cheap jewelry, and unwholesome confectionery, and more unwholesome novels, by the wholesale, and was her escort to the few places of amusement she was permitted to attend, and was her most intimate friend on earth.

But she was not in love with *him*—not the least bit. He was always "dear old Dick," and she was very fond of him,

and he knew it, and that very frank fondness plunged him into the deepest abyss of despair.

"She is waiting for a modern Count Lara," Mr. Derwent thought, moodily, "a second Eugene Aram, a magnificent creature with black whiskers and a pale face, and a murder or two in his mind. That's the worst of devouring novels by the dozen. Where's the girl of sixteen will look twice at a fellow whose beard crops up in white and red stubbles, and who is obliged to wear patched pantaloons, when her head is full of Sir Lancelots and Giaours, and grandiose chaps of that kind? She'll elope with some sixpenny barber from New York, the happy possessor of dyed hair and mustache, and two melancholy dark eyes, and Dick Derwent may cut his throat, for all that she will care."

The young man came to a halt as he reached this gloomy climax. The place of tryst was evidently gained. A dismal spot—a dozen yards beyond the house—on the verge of the windy cliffs, screened from the beach below by a clump of dwarf cedars.

He glanced over the bushes, but the shore below was in darkness. A regiment might be in hiding under that beetling cliff and be none the wiser.

A watery moon looked out from the scudding clouds, but cast no light on that eerie spot, and the man who leaned motionless against the rock, directly below him, was unseen by Dick Derwent.

The sub-editor of the Rockledge "News" drew forth a big silver watch, and looked at the dial by the pallid glimmer of the moon.

"Half past eight, and no sign of her yet. She'll keep me waiting and cooling my shins here an hour or so, as usual, and may be won't come at all. What an unutterable ass I am, to let a little, novel-reading chit of sixteen fool me like—Oh, by George, here she is!"

His whole face lighted up—grew radiant. Plain Dick Derwent was transformed, in a second, by the magical power of love. Where was common sense, his reasoning and his railing now? Yonder came his darling, and all the world was forgotten!

She came breathlessly—flying over the marsh, a shawl over her head and grasped under her chin—the wind fluttering her cheap gray dress.

"Waiting, Dick?" she cried, panting. "I always keep you waiting, don't I? But I couldn't steal out any sooner. I was afraid I couldn't come at all."

"But you're here now, Miss Mallory, and, as Mr. Toots remarks, the waiting is of no consequence, thank you! Here are the books, four of 'em, enough to keep you reading for one week."

"Thank you, Dick! But, oh! where's the use? I won't be let read them; I'll never be able to return them—never get the chance to meet you here again. Yes, Dick," with deepest solemnity, "this is the last time you and I can ever meet."

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Mr. Derwent, "what on earth *do* you mean, Miss Mallory? The last time? You never mean to say that old curmudgeon is going to send you away to school at last?"

"No, Dick—ten times worse. I wish it was only school. He's going," in an awful whisper, "to—marry—me!"

"What!" cried Dick, in horror, "marry you—his niece—that old man? Estella—"

"Oh, no, no! not himself. He's going to marry me to another man. And you'd never guess the man, Dick—that dreadful wretch, Captain Roysten Darrell."

Dick Derwent recoiled a pace, with a face full of horror.

"Estella!"

"I don't know why it is, or what he wants to marry me for," continued Estella, rapidly; "but he does. He was with uncle all the afternoon, and as soon as he went, uncle sent for me, and told me I must be married in a week, and to the captain of the 'Raven.' Think of that, Dick—in a week! Of course I said no—flat—and uncle got into a rage and threatened to lock me up in the garret with the rats and beetles, and keep me on bread and water until I consented. Oh, Dick! what will become of me—what shall I do?"

"See them both at the bottom of the bottomless pit!" burst out Mr. Derwent. "The cold-blooded old reptile! Why, if he searched the universe, he could hardly find a more desperate villain than that outlawed smuggler. Dare-devil Darrell! Marry you to him! Good heavens! he had better take and pitch you, headforemost, into the sea yonder, and end your misery at once. Marry Roysten

Darrell! Not if I know myself, Essie; and I rather think I do."

"Dear old Dick! I knew you would help me. What would ever become of me only for you? But what can I do? To-morrow he comes for his answer, and if the answer is 'no,' up in the attic I'll be locked as sure as we stand here."

"Then don't give them the chance," said impetuous Dick; "run away to-night. Does the hoary old reprobate think he has gone back to the dark ages, to lock young and lovely females in the 'deepest dungeon beneath the castle moat,' upon bread and water? Give them the slip, Essie—make yourself 'thin air' at once."

"And go where?" asked the young lady, calmly. "Look here, Dick, I've been thinking it over, and it's of no use. Uncle is the richest man and the most powerful man in Rockledge. Half of the town are his tenants—all are afraid of him—none of them will willingly incur his displeasure. If I leave here, where will I go? who will receive me? You have no home to take me to, and you are the only friend I have got. I can't be a burden upon anybody, and I haven't the faintest idea of any way on earth to earn my own living. What am I going to do?"

She clasped her hands, and looked earnestly up in his face.

He could see the solemn darkness of those rare hazel eyes in the fitful moonlight. How pretty she was! how pretty! how pretty! and how friendless and helpless!

His heart leaped up with a great bound; his face turned dark red. The young fellow trembled from head to foot.

"There is one way, Essie," he said, hoarsely—"only one that I can see, and I—I am afraid to name it."

"Afraid!" The dark eyes looked at him in wonder. "Afraid, Dick! What can it be?"

"You must marry some one else, and at once! You are friendless and helpless, and in their power. I have no home to take you to, as you say; and, oh, Essie! I would give my heart's blood for you! But if, when the time comes which they appoint for your marriage with Roysten Darrell, you are the wife of some other man, then you can safely defy them both. A husband's authority is the strongest in the world."

He spoke rapidly, excitedly, almost incoherently, the

perspiration standing like beads on his flushed face. The great brown eyes gazed at him in ever-increasing wonder.

"But who am I to marry, Dick? It is jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, isn't it? Who am I to marry?"

"Marry me!"

The murder was out. Estella gave a little gasp, then stood staring. But with that desperate header came back Dick's courage, and into the subject he plunged head foremost.

"Marry me, Estella! I love you with all my heart and soul! I have loved you, I think, ever since I saw you first. I would die for your sake! I would give my life to make you happy! I never dared speak before. I would not dare speak now, but for what you have told me. Oh, Essie! You like me a little, don't you? Come with me, and be my wife!"

"But, Dick— Oh, good gracious! who'd have thought it? I—I never was so—"

But here Dick broke in, like an impetuous torrent.

"I am not worthy of you, Estella. You, so beautiful, and so much above me! But I love you so dearly, and I will devote my whole life to making you happy. Don't say no, Estella! Think of your danger—think how I worship you! Oh, surely it is better to marry me than to marry Roysten Darrell!"

"A great deal better," responded Miss Mallory, decisively. "Oh, dear, dear! what an astonisher this is! The idea of your being in love with me all this time, and I never dreaming of it! Why, Dick," and here Miss Mallory set up a silvery laugh, "I never thought it was in you to be in love at all. I thought you were wrapped up in that horrid printing office and that stupid Rockledge 'News.' "

"But now you know, and you— Oh, Essie, you like me a little, don't you?" cried Dick, piteously.

"I like you a great deal," answered Estella, with delicious candor. "Better than anybody in the world. But I'm not a bit in love with you, you know, Dick."

"And you'll marry me? Essie—Essie darling, say yes!"

"Yes!" said Estella, promptly. "What fun it will be to outwit those two schemers! I'd marry you if it was

only for that. But, oh, dear! the idea of you and me being married! Dick Derwent, it's *too* ridiculous."

"Don't talk like that, Essie," Dick said, his honest face all aglow with rapture. "I'm the happiest fellow on earth. I can't promise you a fine house, and rich dresses, and servants, just yet, but I'll work for you like a galley-slave, and you—you won't mind a little poverty at first, will you, darling?"

"Mind!" said Estella. "I should think I was pretty well used to it. Look at that grim old prison. There isn't a cottage in Rockledge half so meanly furnished. Look at my dress! Two of these cheap gray things is all I get from one year's end to the other. Look at our table—porridge and potatoes, and salt fish, and brown bread, and weak tea. Poverty! I've had sixteen years of that, Dick, and I should think, as I said before, I was pretty well used to it."

"My own dear Essie! It will go hard with me or we will do better than that. I will go in rags, so that you may be dressed. I will starve, so that you may have dainties. I will labor night and day, that those dear hands may never know toil. Oh, my dearest! how happy, how happy you have made me!"

Gushing two-and-twenty! delirious first love!

Miss Mallory smiled complacently. This was as it should be—this was how she would be wooed—this was living a chapter out of one of her pet romances.

True, the hero had a snub nose, and perennial smudges of printers' ink upon it, but still, for the time being, he *was* a hero, and Edgar Ravenswood could hardly do better.

"That's all very nice Dick, and I'm very much obliged to you, I am sure. But how is it going to be managed? How are we going to be married?"

"In the only way—elope."

"Yes," said Estella, calmly; "but when? and how? Remember, we have only a week."

"And a week is an abundance of time! Oh, my darling, I am ready to go wild with delight when I think you will be all my own in one short week! Let me see—this is Thursday night. Essie, you must pretend to consent, and fix this night week for the ceremony."

"But, Dick, I hate to tell lies! It is too mean."

"Unfortunately, white lies are indispensable on these

occasions. We must outwit these schemers. Meantime, I will make arrangements for our immediate union. I have a cousin, newly ordained, over at Leaport, who will be glad of a chance to oblige me, and who is not in the least in dread of the great Mr. Fisher. He will marry us, Essie, and next Tuesday shall be the night."

"And then, Dick?"

"Then we will return to Rockledge, able to snap our fingers in the faces of Peter Fisher and Roysten Darrell. If they dare say one word, I'll show them both up in next week's 'News,' and make the state too hot to hold them. We will board for awhile with Mrs. Daly, where I stop now, until I build a pretty little nest for my pretty little bird. You understand all this, Essie, and will obey?"

"I will do anything to escape Roysten Darrell," replied the girl, with a shudder—"anything in the wide world, Dick. Where shall I meet you on Tuesday night?"

"Here—I will have a conveyance waiting on the road to take us to Leaport. My dearest girl, you will never repent your trust in me."

"Dear old Dick, I know it. And now I must go. Judith locks up after nine, and it won't do for me to be missed. On Tuesday night, then, I will meet you here again. Until then, good-bye!"

"Good-bye, darling Essie!" He took her hand and kissed it rapturously. "I think I am the happiest fellow on earth. If anything of importance occurs between this and Tuesday, I will write. Don't you think you could meet me again Sunday evening?"

"I don't know; I will if I can. Good-bye, and good-night!"

She darted away with the last words, and was lost in the darkness before Richard Derwent could quite realize she had gone.

He turned slowly homeward, with a glow at his heart like a halo around a full moon, all unconscious of the silent listener under the cliff who had overheard every word.

CHAPTER IV.

ROYSTEN DARRELL COUNTERPLOTS.

As Dick Derwent's footsteps died away, the eavesdropper emerged from the shadow into the fitful moonlight, and the

lofty stature and bold, handsome face of Captain Roysten Darrell was revealed.

"So!" he thought, with a long whistle, "the game grows interesting—the plot thickens! A rival on the field, eh? Mr. Dick Derwent, sub-editor of the 'Rockledge News,' thinks to outwit Dare-devil Darrell! How lucky I stayed here, waiting for Briggs, and how doubly lucky that Briggs hasn't come! My pretty little Estella, we'll see whether Roysten Darrell or Dick Derwent will win the game!"

He strode over the beach, whistling "*My Love is but a Lassie Yet,*" and lost in thought.

"There will be the devil to pay with Carlotta," he mused, his brow knitting; "she's as stubborn as a mule, and as jealous as—as a jealous woman—but she must yield! I don't care a sou for the girl, and if I can get her to believe that, and dazzle her with the prospective fortune, she may hear to reason. But managing Estella will be a trifle to managing her. The very old demon is in her, I believe, when her spirit is up."

He walked along rapidly—a long, lonely walk. The watery glimmer of the pale moon lighted up the long-deserted beach, the waste of moaning sea, the beetling cliffs overhead. He walked along for upward of a mile over the shingly shore, passing the spot where the "*Raven*" lay rising and falling lazily on the long groundswell.

No human habitation was in sight, no living thing met his view—the sobbing night wind, the moaning sea, the pallid moonlight, had the ghastly stretch of shore all to themselves.

But Roysten Darrell hastened along, with the air of a man who knows where he is going. Another half mile is passed, and then the first sign of human habitation came in view. And yet, was it a habitation? A low, ruinous black building, dark and deserted, known as the "*Den*" to the fishermen along the coast, and popularly supposed to be haunted—an unspeakably ghastly place to be inhabited.

No ray of light came from its boarded windows, no sound from its gloomy walls, but at the door of this dreary ruin the captain of the "*Raven*" stopped, and applying his lips to the key-hole, whistled shrilly three times.

The signal was almost immediately answered. Bolts shot

back, chains rattled, the door opened cautiously, and a bearded face looked out into the night.

" You, cap'n?" said a bass voice.

" I, Marlow. Let me in. Is Monks here, and the rest?"

" Come half an hour ago, and enjoying theirselves. Don't you hear 'em? They'll bring the vultures down on the 'Den' with their infernal row."

The captain strode in; the door was again secured. He stood in a long passage-way dimly lighted by an oil-lamp, and the noise of many voices singing in the distance reached him plainly.

" There's danger on yon heaving sea,
There's lightning in yon cloud;
And hark the music, mariners!
The wind is piping loud.
The wind is pipng loud, my boys;
The lightning flashes free;
The world of waters is our home,
And merry men are we!"

" And merry men are we!" yelled a dozen uproarious voices. " And here's the captain, the merriest of the lot! A long life and a merry one to the captain of the 'Raven!'"

The toast was drunk with a perfect screech of enthusiasm. Captain Darrell stood in the door-way, calmly regarding the scene. A large, vault-like apartment filled with casks and bales—too plainly contraband—rude benches for seats, a ruder table in the center, and an oil-lamp swinging above, dully lighting all.

Around the table, noisily drinking and playing cards, over a dozen men were seated—stalwart, ferocious fellows, all armed to the teeth, rolling out oaths and tobacco juice in perpetual volleys.

" Too much noise, my lads—too much noise!" said Roy-sten Darrell. " You'll fetch the revenue sharks down upon you before you know it. Monks, a word with you."

One of the men arose—a black-bearded, piratical-looking desperado—and followed his tall commander into a second passage darker than the first.

" Anything new, cap'n? Is Briggs coming for his venture to-night?"

" I missed Briggs. Look here, Monks, you go to Rock-

ledge sometimes; do you know a chap there called Dick Derwent—printer by trade?"

"A tall, slim youth—part editor of the 'News?' As well as I know myself, cap'n."

"Good! He is in my way, Monks—you understand? I have a little project on foot with which he may interfere."

"What! that milksop? Whew!" whistled Monks.

"Milksops make mischief sometimes. Keep your eye on him, Monks. On Monday night next he must be secured without fail, and without noise. You hear?"

"All right! I'm good for a dozen Dick Derwents. Where are we to fetch him? To the Den, or on board the 'Raven?'"

"On board the 'Raven.' See that it's all done on the quiet, Monks—I don't want a stir made. That is all—you can go back to your game."

He turned away, and walked down the dark passage. Before he reached the end, a door opened, a stream of light poured forth, and there was a woman's glad cry.

"I knew your step, Roysten. Who would have looked for you so soon? Come in—supper is ready and waiting."

Two warm arms went round his neck; two impetuous lips met his; two strong little hands drew him in and shut the door.

"And I am as hungry as a bear, Carlotta; so let us have it as soon as may be, my girl."

It was a smaller room than the first—and surprisingly cosy and comfortable for such a place. A carpet covered the floor, the chairs were cushioned, a plump, white bed stood in a corner, there were pictures on the wall, books on the shelves, a fire in a little cook-stove, and a mirror over the rude mantel. A large lamp lighted it brightly, glittering on a well-spread supper-table and on the small, slender figure of the woman who stood beside it.

A very small and slender figure—a little dark creature—with great black eyes, jet-black hair, and a dark, olive skin. A darkly beautiful creature, with a passionate, southern face, dressed in a rich robe of crimson silk, and with jewels flashing on her thin, dark hands.

Roysten Darrell flung off his loose great-coat, and seated himself at the table. The little Creole beauty poured out a cup of fragrant chocolate, and pushed all the dainties on the board before him.

"I have news for you to-night, Carlotta," he said, plunging at once, with a reckless rapidity that was characteristic of the man, into his unpleasant revelations. "I am going to be married."

The great black eyes dilated--the thin, red lips sprung apart.

"What?"

"I am going to be married, Carlotta--married to a great heiress, my girl. A little, wishy-washy school-girl, fresh from the nursery, whom I have never seen six times in my life. What do you think of that?"

"I don't understand," the woman Carlotta said, her dark face paling strangely. "You are joking with Carlotta. I am your wife."

"So you are, my beauty, and there is a law prohibiting men, in this narrow-minded country, from having more wives than one. But the law and Roysten Darrell have been at loggerheads this many a day, and it's rather late to respect its majesty now. Yes, I'm going to be married, and in a week, and to an heiress, and we'll take the little bride for her honey-moon trip on board the 'Raven'; and when the 'Raven' weighs anchor out in the cove yonder again, I will be a widower, and the sole possessor of the late Mrs. Darrell's fortune."

And then, while he eat and drank at his leisure, Roysten Darrell retold the plot laid by Peter Fisher for securing the wealth of his ward, and retold that second plot he had overheard beneath the cliff.

"I'll secure the heiress, and foil Mr. Dick Derwent," the captain of the "Raven" concluded, finishing his meal. "Come, Carlotta, sit here on my knee, and listen to reason. There is no need for you to wear that white, scared face; I wouldn't give my little gypsy wife for a dozen heiresses. But to win half a million of money at one swoop, that is not to be sneezed at. This pale, sickly girl of sixteen will never come back alive, and you and I, my darling Carlotta, will share her wealth, and live in clover for the rest of our lives."

"Will you murder her, Roysten?" the woman said, with dilated eyes.

"Murder her? No—I wouldn't see her worst enemy do that. But seasickness, and horror of me, and the loss of her lover, and our wild life, will murder her. Depend

upon it, the little bride will never come back alive, or if she does, only to get a divorce, and free herself from the husband she hates with every penny of her fortune. Come, Carlotta, say you consent, and let us consider the matter settled."

The woman clasped her arms passionately round his neck, and laid her dark face on his bosom with a dry, choking sob.

"Could I refuse you anything in the world, my love, my husband—anything in the wide world? Has poor Carlotta any will but yours? But, oh, Roysten! it would be easier to die than see you even for an hour wedded to another!"

* * * * *

Estella Mallory reached the house just in time to escape being locked out. Old Judith turned upon her with no very pleasant face.

"And where have *you* been, pray, this hour of the night? I thought you were safely up in your room. What will Mr. Fisher say to this gadding?"

"I wasn't gadding, and Mr. Fisher will say nothing, Grandmother Grumpy, for you won't tell him. Good-night, Judith; if you took a mouthful of fresh air yourself every evening, you would be none the worse for it. People grow yellow and cross from moping forever in-doors."

She ran off to her room, singing a snatch of a song, her books hidden beneath her shawl. Like all the rooms in the house, Estella's chamber was long and low, and dark and moldering; but the girl had brightened it a little with muslin curtains, and a gay patchwork quilt to her bed, and flimsy little fixings of crochet-work, and books and cheap prints, mostly gifts from Dick. She sat up reading until her candle sputtered and died out; and then she went to bed to dream how cleverly she was going to outplot the plotters.

Roysten Darrell came next day, and was closeted for over an hour with Mr. Fisher. Then Estella was summoned, and went down-stairs in some trepidation to face the stalwart wooer she dreaded.

"And how is my little Estella?" cried the captain of the "Raven," his brilliant blue eyes sparkling with mischievous light. "Grown out of all knowledge, and pret-

tier than a picture. Come here, my dear, and give me a kiss."

But Miss Mallory drew herself up, her great dark eyes flashing, and turned her back upon him in haughty disdain.

" You sent for me, Mr. Fisher," she said, coldly.

" Yes, my dear—for your answer, you know," replied old Peter Fisher, his wicked old face distorted into an evil smile. " Captain Darrell wishes to be married next Thursday night—the 'Raven' sails on Saturday. What do you say?"

" No!" said Estella, promptly.

" All right!" exclaimed Roysten Darrell. " Then we shall be obliged to use a little gentle force. You'll see that all the wedding-gear is prepared, Mr. Fisher, and when Thursday night comes, I dare say Miss Mallory will change her mind. Until then it is useless to trouble her; but I think she had better remain in the house as much as possible. Brides-elect never show, I believe, for a week beforehand. That will do, my dear. If you won't consent, and if you won't give me that kiss, perhaps you *will* go back to your room."

" Not at *your* bidding," flashed Estella, defiantly. " Have you anything more to say to me, uncle?"

" No! Be off; and be thankful I don't rope's-end you for your impertinence, miss!"

Estella obeyed, flushed and angry, and from her window, soon after, saw Captain Darrell striding over the marsh. And he came no more.

Saturday and Sunday passed, and she was left in peace, but, to her dismay, a prisoner. Old Judith had orders not to allow her to cross the threshold, and old Judith was a very dragon of fidelity to her grim master.

Monday came, and with it a ray of hope to Estella. The butcher's boy, from Rockledge, bringing the meat for dinner, brought also a tiny note for Miss Mallory.

Estella chanced to be alone in the kitchen when he came, Judith being upstairs over her chamber-work. The note was in Dick's hand. With a cry of delight she tore it open and read:

" On Tuesday night, at half past nine, meet me at the old place. All is ready. Don't fail."

That was all; but it was Dick's writing, and her heart gave a great bound.

"I'll meet him, if I have to jump out of the window!" she thought. "Marry Roysten Darrell, indeed! Not if I were to be hung, drawn and quartered for refusing."

Tuesday came—a wet, windy day. All the morning Estella remained shut up in her room; all the afternoon she wandered about the house, in a fever of anxiety. Night closed down early—wetter and windier than the day.

Fortune seemed to favor her. Judith was laid up with rheumatism, and obliged to go to bed at dark.

Groaning with pain, she ordered Estella up to her room, locked the house door, and hobbled off to her own.

Nine o'clock, and all was still. Twenty minutes past, and nothing to be heard but the tumult of wind and rain.

Wrapped in her shawl, and wearing a hat and thick veil, Estella stole down-stairs, unfastened the house door with trembling fingers, and stood out in the wet darkness—free!

She did not pause a second. Heedless of wind, and rain, and pitchy darkness, she fled to the place of tryst.

Was Dick there? Yes; a man stood dimly outlined against the dark background, waiting.

"Estella," he said, in a whisper, "is it you?"

"It is I, Dick. Quick! I may be missed."

He took her hand and hurried her on. A buggy stood waiting on the road. He lifted her in, sprung to the seat beside her, and drove off like the wind.

There was no time to talk—they flew along too quickly—and the uproar of the storm would have drowned their voices.

Dick's cap was pulled over his nose, and his coat-collar turned up, so that his face was completely hidden.

For nearly an hour they rattled along; then he pulled up suddenly—before a light glimmering in the dark.

"This is the place," he said, hurriedly. "The clergyman is waiting. Quick!"

He drew her along—into a house—into a room. A smoky lamp only made the darkness visible, and through her veil the frightened girl saw, dimly, a man dressed as a clergyman, and two others, all talking in a group.

"There is no time to lose," said Estella's companion. "We may be pursued. Marry us at once, and let us be off."

He never removed his cap; she did not put up her veil. She was trembling from head to foot. The wild night-journey—this gloomy room—these strange men! She was frightened, and quivering all over.

The minister opened his book; the ceremony began.

But Estella's head was whirling—all was confusion and indistinct. She answered, “I will!” vaguely. She saw a ring slipped on her finger, as we see things in a dream. Then all was over, and she was out in the wet night once more, flying along the road, and this was her husband by her side!

They sped along. Faint and frightened, she cowered in a corner, while the man beside her never uttered a word. On and on they went, stopping with a jerk at last—where, Estella did not know.

“Here we are!” said the silent bridegroom. “Home at last!”

He lifted her out—bore her along like a whirlwind toward a house—opened the door and ushered her into a dark hall.

“This way,” he said. “They have forgotten to light up. Here are the stairs—look out!”

He half led, half carried her up the stairs, opened a door at the top, and disclosed a lighted room.

“At home!” he cried. “Throw up your veil, my dear little wife, and give me that kiss now!”

That voice! She *did* fling back her veil, in wild affright. Oh, where was she? This familiar room—the dreary parlor of Fisher's Folly; those well-known faces—old Peter Fisher and Judith—grinning at her across the table.

“You thought to outwit us,” chuckled the old man, grimly. “We have turned the tables and outwitted *you*. My dear Mrs. Roysten Darrell, let me be the first to offer my congratulations!”

She wheeled round, with a smothered cry, and looked at the man beside her. The cap was flung off, the coat-collar turned down.

Tall and handsome, with the face of a smiling demon, there stood the man she had married—Roysten Darrell!

CHAPTER V.

IN THE ATTIC.

IT was a scene worthy a melodrama.

For an instant dead silence reigned. The triumphant plotters stood looking at their victim, and she—poor, snared bird—stood paralyzed, her great brown eyes, wide and wild, fixed in unutterable horror upon the man she had married.

He was the first to break the silence. With a loud laugh, he strode toward her, his arms extended.

"Ha! ha! ha! how the little one stares! Am I the Gorgon's head, my dear, and have I turned you to stone? Come, my little brown-eyed bride, it is time your blissful bridegroom had a kiss!"

Another stride toward her—then Estella awoke. With a wild, wild cry, that rang through the house, she flung up both arms and fled to the furthest corner of the room.

"Keep off!" she shrieked, "you pirate! you murderer! you second Cain! If you touch me, I shall die!"

Roysten Darrell laughed again—his deep, melodious, bass laugh.

"Hard names, my dear, to begin the honey-moon with. Come, you must forgive our little trick—all's fair in love, you know. You would have tricked me, remember, if you could—you and that little whipper-snapper of a printer. I don't bear any malice, but I really couldn't stand by and see you throw yourself away on a contemptible little jackanapes like that. Come, come, Estella—let by-gones be by-gones! You're my wife now, as fast as church and state can make you, and the only thing you can do is to submit to the inevitable and consent to make me the happiest of men. Come, my dear—come! Get out of that corner and say you forgive me!"

Again he came toward her, and again that frenzied shriek rang through the house.

"Don't come near me! don't touch me! If you lay your finger upon me, I shall go mad! Roysten Darrell, I will never forgive you to my dying day!"

"Oh, yes, you will, my dear! Don't be unchristian. You can't blame me for loving you to distraction, such a

pretty little girl as you are; you can't blame me for overhearing your little conspiracy with Mr. Richard Derwent; and least of all can you blame me for proving myself the more skillful plotter of the two. Think better of it, my dear little wife; don't stand glaring upon me there, as though I were an African gorilla, but hear to reason. We're married; I'm your husband, and it's a wife's solemn duty to love, honor and obey her husband, if I know anything of my catechism and the marriage service. Come, Mrs. Darrell—come! You *must* yield, sooner or later—then why not at once?"

For the third time he approached, and for the third time the girl's frenzied screams echoed through the house. Even Roysten Darrell drew back, appalled.

"The devil's in it!" he muttered. "Who would think she would raise such a row? I believe in my soul she will go mad if I touch her. Fisher, she splits my ears—make her stop that infernal yelling."

Old Peter Fisher, his little eyes glaring with wrath, strode forward and seized her arm in a vicious grip.

"You screaming hyena, if you don't stop that noise this instant, I'll choke you! Stop it, I say—stop it! Do you hear? Do you want to drive us deaf, you confounded, cross-grained little wild-cat?"

"Save me from that man!" cried Estella, almost beside herself—"save me from him, and I will do what you say! Oh, Uncle Fisher, save me—save me! If you let him come near me, I shall die!"

"Die, then!" exclaimed Uncle Fisher, giving her a vindictive shake—"the sooner the better! Of all the plagues of Egypt—of all the plagues that ever were heard of—there never was invented such a plague as girls! Stand there, you screeching vixen, and listen to me! That man's your husband—do you hear me, mistress? Your husband—the master of your destiny—your owner for life. I'm not going to keep another man's wife here. Drop that howling, and get ready and go with the man you have married."

"I never married him!" Estella wildly cried. "I would have died ten thousand deaths sooner! I thought it was Dick Derwent, and he knows it. I will never go with him—I will never speak to him as long as he lives! If you let him lay one finger upon me, I will kill myself—I will, Uncle Fisher—and my blood will be on your head!"

She spoke and looked like one demented—her face ghastly pale, her eyes starting from their sockets, her brown hair all wild and disheveled about her.

The old sinner recoiled, and stood staring at her in dismay.

"I really believe you *would*, you little tigress!" he exclaimed. "Darrell, what, in the name of all the fiends, are we to do with this exasperating minx?"

Captain Darrell shrugged his broad shoulders, and lounged easily up against the chimney-piece.

"She's excited now, *mon ami*—she'll think better of it by and by. Didn't I hear you speak about locking up Miss Mallory, upon bread and water, not long ago? Try that cooling prescription with Mrs. Roysten Darrell for a day or two, and see how it works. It is rather trying to begin the honey-moon—widowed; but what can't be cured, etc. Meantime, with your good permission, I'll light a cigar, and go home."

He took out an inlaid cigar-case, selected a weed, and coolly lighted it.

"Your wife shall go with you, Darrell!" Peter Fisher exclaimed, with flashing eyes. "By all the furies, I am not to be baffled by a girl in her teens! Stand up here, you diabolical little viper, and hear me for the last time. Will you go with your husband, or will you not?"

"He is no husband of mine, and I will be torn to pieces before I go with him!" Estella answered, wildly.

"And so you shall—for your choice lies between going with him, or being torn to pieces by the rats in the attic. I swear by all that is holy, girl, if you refuse to go with Roysten Darrell, the moment the door closes upon him, up garret you go, to be starved and eaten alive by an army of rats! Take your choice—freedom and a bridegroom, or starvation and the rats."

"Better rats than murderers!" the girl cried, trembling from head to foot. "Anything is better than that dreadful man! I am not his wife, and you know it. I can die, but I can never, never go with him!"

"Be it so, then!" exclaimed the old man, in a voice of suppressed fury. "You have chosen. Roysten Darrell, go! She shall abide by her choice. Judith, woman, light the captain out, and then go to bed. By this time tomorrow night, my lady, your hot blood will hardly bound

so high. I know what a night among rats is like, if you don't. Away with you, Darrell! Your bride will not go with you to-night."

"One last chance, Estella," said Roysten Darrell, starting up and drawing near. "Come with me! You *are* my wife, and I'll treat you well—I will, upon the honor of an outlaw! Come—you'll find me better company than the rats in the attic."

But at his approach the shrieks broke out again, and she fled away to the remotest end of the room.

"Go!" said Peter Fisher, sternly; "waste no more words. I'll make her repent her obstinacy to the last day of her life. Light him out, Judith, and—you needn't come back."

"Good-night, then," said the captain of the "Raven," swinging round, "since you *will* have it so. I will live in the hope of a more favorable answer to-morrow. Good-night, Fisher! Temper justice with mercy—give her a light and a switch to scare off the rats."

He was gone. Judith followed him out with a candle. From first to last she had not uttered a word. She had stood looking about, as grim and unmoved as a Chinese idol.

"Now, then, mistress!" exclaimed the old man, with a diabolical grin; "now for your choice—now for the attic, now for the rats! Come!"

Estella held up her clasped hands and white, wild face.

"Have pity on me!" she cried. "Oh, Uncle Fisher, don't—don't shut me up in that dreadful place!"

"The choice is your own," he said, furiously clutching her by the arm. "You *would* have it, and, by Heaven, up you go! I will teach you what it is to defy and enrage me! Stop that whining. I won't have it. Up you go, though an angel were to descend from realms celestial to plead your cause. Come!"

He grasped her furiously, and dragged her along. She struggled and screamed, but old as he was, her strength was as nothing to the roused old tiger. He drew her to the door, and met Judith returning with the light.

"Go on before!" thundered her master. "It is as much as I can do to drag this vixen up."

Without a word, without a look, the woman turned to obey, deaf to the victim's wild cries.

"Save me, Judith! Oh, Judith! Judith! help me! Don't let him lock me in that awful place! Oh, Judith, help me! help me!"

But Judith stalked grimly on, neither looking to the right nor left.

"Ahal!" chuckled Estella's tormentor, "you begin to dread it already, do you? Well, it's not too late yet. Shall I send Judith out after Roysten Darrell?"

"No—no—no! a thousand times no! But oh, Uncle Fisher, pity me—save me! For the dear Lord's sake, don't lock me in the attic!"

She might as well have spoken to the wall. He beat down the struggling hands and face furiously, and dragged her after him by main force. Past her room, up the creaking, rotting attic stairs—up amid dust and darkness, and silence and desolation.

"Throw open the door, Judith," ordered Peter Fisher, "until I fling her in!"

She obeyed. A rush of cold air came out and almost extinguished the light. Estella had one glimpse of the pitchy blackness, of the horrible creatures scampering noisily over the floor, of the bloated black beetles and spiders on the wall, and then she was thrust in headlong, the door drawn violently to, the key turned, and she was locked in the attic. Her last long scream might have curdled their blood, so like that of a maniac did it sound.

Old Judith turned to her master, and spoke for the first time.

"That girl will be raving mad by morning," she said, with a stony stare.

"Let her," snarled Peter Fisher. "She deserves it. No one in this house shall defy *me* with impunity! You mind your own business, old beldame, and go to bed."

He snatched the light from her, gave her a vicious push as a hint to precede him, and followed her down the grimy stairs. She spoke no more. She stalked on ahead, silent and grim. But at her own chamber-door she paused, turned, favored her master with a second death's-head stare, opened her lips, and spoke:

"The girl will be mad or dead by morning! Mind, I've warned you!"

Before he could speak, she had disappeared, slammed the door and locked it in his face.

"I'd like to lock you with her, you brimstone witch!" snarled the old man, viciously, his little eyes glaring. "Let her go mad! What do I care? Mad or sane, she is married, and Monsieur the Count shall pay me many a bright gold piece before he gets his daughter."

He walked on to his room and went grimly to bed, and Estella was alone in the attic.

Alone, in the inexpressible horrors of that most horrible prison. The wind shrieked madly; the rain beat in torrents upon the roof and poured in through a dozen apertures; the blackness was something palpable—something to be felt; the raw cold pierced to the bone; the sea roared like a thousand wild beasts let loose. Without and within, horrors and tempest untold.

She stood in the spot where the old man had thrust her, benumbed. The uproar without, so plainly heard here, deafened and stunned her at first. But only for a few moments; then she awoke—awoke fully to the greater horrors within.

She could hear the rats scampering back with the noise of a troop of horses. She could see the glitter of their fierce eyes in the dark; she could hear their shrill cries. She seemed to see again the myriads of loathsome, crawling things that blackened the walls, and now—and now the rats were upon her!

Her shrieks broke out afresh—mad, mad shrieks of insanest terror. But they were upon her—crawling over her feet, beneath her clothes; more than once their sharp teeth fastened in her flesh. She could not shake them off. She rushed to the door; she beat upon it madly; her hands were all cut, and torn, and bleeding; her screams were something fearful to hear.

In vain—all in vain! Still they came—fierce and countless; they swarmed around her—upon her; they bit fiercely at the yielding flesh. One last, agonizing cry, and then she fell, face forward, among them—dead to them and all mortal agony.

CHAPTER VI.

"SICK AND IN PRISON."

OLD Judith had gone to her room, but not to bed. Beneath that grim, iron surface, somewhere beat a woman's

heart, or the callous remains of one. She knew what the attic of Fisher's Folly was like; she knew the horrors of darkness and hordes of fierce rats. She sat down on the edge of her bed, and listened to the mad uproar of wind, and rain, and sea.

"Fit night for such a marriage," she thought—"fit night for such demons' babes as Roysten Darrell and Peter Fisher. Brave men both to pit themselves against one little, helpless girl—both heroes each! Will I sit here and let that child go raving mad up there? She called upon me for help, in her agony, and I—I had a daughter once."

The grim old face worked. Another wild gale shook the old house, rattled noisily at doors and windows, and beat the rain in a deluge against the walls.

"A horrible night," Judith thought, with a shudder; "a horrible house to live in, and horrible wretches to live among. And I am as bad as the worst if I sit here and see that child go mad. No, Peter Fisher, turn me out tomorrow upon the cold world, if you will—I will defy and disobey you to-night."

She seized her candle, strode to the door, and up the creaking stairs to the attic—just in time, and no more, to hear that last, frenzied shriek and that dull, heavy fall.

"Estella!" she called, rattling at the door, "Estella, child! it is Judith. Speak to me. I am going to break the lock and let you out."

But there was no reply. Only the frantic raving of the tempest, the noisy scampering of the rats.

"Lord have mercy upon us sinners!" cried the old woman, remorse-stricken. "She has fallen in a dead faint, and the rats are eating her alive!"

She looked around; a heavy bar of iron lay among a heap of rubbish in a corner of the passage. To seize this, to batter down the old lock, was hardly the work of three minutes.

But the noise had reached the keen ears of the master of Fisher's Folly. Before her work was done she heard the shuffling tread of his slippers feet, and saw his fierce, wrathful old face glaring upon her from the head of the stairs.

"What in the fiend's name are you about, you hag?" he cried, furiously. "Have you gone mad?"

"No," said Judith, never pausing in her work, "but

your victim has. I'm bad enough, the Lord knows, or I'd not be housekeeper for ten years to an incarnate devil like *you*, Peter Fisher; but I'll not stand by and see a murder done, while I have hands to help or a voice to cry out."

The old man rushed forward, his eyes literally blazing with fury.

"I'll throttle you, you diabolical old hag! Stop that this instant and go back to your room!"

But Judith raised her formidable bar, with an unflinching face.

"Don't come near me, Mr. Fisher—don't try to stop me! I'm not often roused, but I'm the more dangerous when I *am*! I'll take this child out of her prison, or I'll know the reason why! Stand back—I'm not afraid of you! Stand back, I say, and let me work!"

He recoiled, absolutely frightened. In all his ten years' experience of her he had never seen *that* look on the gaunt face of his housekeeper before. It was dangerous to thwart her now. She beat down the rusty lock with one last blow, and flung the old door wide.

"You shall pay for this to-morrow, you beldame!" he hissed, in impotent rage.

But she never heeded him. Still grasping her bar in one hand, and her light in the other, she stalked in, scaring the army of rats.

There, face downward on the floor, lay the unhappy victim, the blood oozing from a deep cut in her forehead.

"Come in, Peter Fisher," Judith called, "and look at your work!"

The old man advanced, recoiled, turned the color of yellow parchment at sight of the flowing blood.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "Is she dead?"

"It is to be hoped so. Better death than madness. Will I leave her here to the rats—they will soon finish their work—and go back down-stairs?"

"No, no, no! Judith, I never meant to kill her. I didn't think she would—Why, she has only fainted."

For Judith had raised her in her strong old arms like a feather's weight.

"Stand aside," she said, grimly. "Your work is done, and you may be proud of it. The moment she dies I'll

walk straight to Rockledge and denounce you as her murderer. Stand aside, and let me pass."

He obeyed, shaking as if with palsy.

The sight of that death-like face, covered with blood, struck an icy chill to the marrow of his bones.

"If she should be dead!" he thought. "What will become of me if she should be dead?"

He followed the housekeeper down-stairs to the door of Estella's room, but she would not permit him to enter.

"Go to your own," she said, authoritatively. "If she is dead you will know it soon enough."

She was mistress of the situation, and he obeyed her like a whipped child.

"If she should be dead!" The horrible thought kept repeating itself over and over again in his mind. "If she is dead, what will become of me?"

She was not dead! Judith laid her upon the bed, sponged the blood off of that icy face, applied hartshorn, burned feathers, cold water and smart slapping, and after more than an hour brought back the fluttering breath. The eyelids quivered an instant, the blue lips parted, then the great, dark eyes opened and looked up.

"Judith," she said, "what is it? Where am I?"

"In your own room, my dear. Here, keep still, and take this warm drink."

But she pushed the drink away, her eyes growing wild with horror.

"And the rats!" she cried. "Oh, Judith, the rats! the rats! Save me from them—save me! save me! save me!"

She grasped the old woman, shriek after shriek ringing frantically through the room. Suddenly her hands relaxed, the screams ceased, and she fell back, once more insensible, upon her pillow.

Morning was breaking, rainy and raw, before she awoke from that second swoon, and then only to rave in the wild delirium of brain fever.

She tossed upon her hot pillow, flinging her arms about, her cheeks flushed burning red, her eyes glittering, her tongue running at random.

As Judith opened the door, in the gray, chill dawn, she beheld her master, huddled in a strange, distorted attitude of fear, in the passage, waiting, listening.

"Will she die, Judith?" he whined, piteously. "Oh, Judith, will she die?"

"Listen to her," said Judith, calmly. "Does that sound as though she would live? If you want breakfast this morning, Mr. Fisher, you may get it for yourself. I'm going out."

"Where?"

"To Rockledge, for a doctor."

"Must we have a doctor? Consider the expense, Judith! I'm a poor man, and doctors are frightfully expensive. Must we have a doctor?"

He caught her dress with that piteous whine—changed in a few hours from a savage tyrant to a cringing slave through the influence of abject terror.

The woman plucked her skirt away, with a look of grim contempt.

"Yes, we must have a doctor, and medicine, and a nurse, and port wine, and beef-tea, and chicken broth, and jellies," she replied, with stony satisfaction; "and you shall pay for all, and be thankful if they save you from the gallows. I don't think you will be in such a hurry to lock any one up in garrets again, Mr. Fisher."

"Don't tell the doctor about that!" exclaimed Peter Fisher, in a fresh paroxysm of terror. "You don't know what he might do if he heard it. And the girl may die! Don't tell him, Judith—my good Judith—and I—I'll be a friend to you all your life!"

Judith's only reply was a look of "ineffable scorn," as she stalked by, in stony silence, to her own apartment.

Through rain and wind, in the bleak dawn, the old woman made her way to Rockledge, routed out the most experienced doctor in the place, and sent him in his gig to Fisher's Folly.

For herself, she strode back, unmindful of wet and mud, and arrived just as the physician was leaving.

"A serious attack of brain fever," the doctor said, gravely—"a very serious attack. Pray what shock has Miss Mallory received to bring it on?"

Old Peter Fisher fidgeted and looked everywhere but in his questioner's stern eyes.

"How can I tell?" he said, querulously. "What do you think? Is she likely to recover?"

"She *may*, she has youth and a superb constitution to

befriend her; but I tell you seriously this is a very dangerous case, and may end in death or insanity. She requires the most devoted nursing by night and day, the tenderest care—care which the old woman is not constituted to give her. You must procure an experienced nurse, Mr. Fisher."

"Will it do to-morrow?" gasped the terrified old man. "I—I expect a friend to-day, and I want to consult with him. Will to-morrow do?"

"It *must*, if you say so. I will be here to-morrow, and every day, and do my utmost for my patient. Poor little Essie! I always liked the child! She *must* have had a terrible nervous shock!"

The doctor departed, and the old man went to his room. He took no breakfast, he took no dinner, he was too thoroughly frightened and miserable even to eat.

He sat crouched in his chair over the fire, his grizzled head in his hands, waiting for Roysten Darrell. And in the sick-room Judith sat, with untiring patience.

About three o'clock of the bleak afternoon, the captain of the "Raven" made his appearance. He entered, blustering as the god of the wind—the picture of superb masculine health and strength—a strange contrast to that cowering, wretched old man.

"Well, uncle-in-law!" cried Captain Darrell, in his big, bass voice, "and how are we to-day? And how is the rebellious bride? Come to her senses yet?"

"She has lost them altogether," answered the old man, starting up and trembling. "Listen to that, Roysten Darrell!"

He held up his finger. In the pause that followed they could hear Estella's voice, loud and strange, talking rapidly.

The captain of the "Raven" turned his inquiring eyes upon Peter Fisher.

"She has gone mad!" said the old man, in an awful whisper. "She is raving in brain fever. The rats up in the attic have driven her insane. We overdid it, Roysten Darrell! Do you hear?" catching and shaking him in fear and rage. "We overdid it!"

"Speak for yourself, you old tyrant!" said Captain Darrell, flinging him off. "I had nothing to do with it. What did I know of your infernal attic? So she has gone

mad, has she? Poor little Estella! Upon my soul, I'm sorry!"

"We had the doctor here to-day," continued Peter Fisher, still trembling with terror and excitement. "Judith went for him, and he says it's ten to one if she ever recovers life and reason. She must have medicine and an experienced nurse, and he will visit her every day. It makes my blood run cold to think of it—the expense, Darrell—the awful expense!"

"When did your blood ever run otherwise than cold, you venerable reptile?" responded Roysten Darrell, with unutterable contempt. "You're a more villainous old miser than I ever gave you credit for, if you can think of expense at such a time. Let the doctor come, and the nurse, too. *I'll* pay the one and provide the other. Poor little girl! I don't set up for a saint, but, by Jove! this is the meanest and dirtiest job I ever had a hand in."

"Will you, Roysten—will you really?" gasped Mr. Fisher, with kindling eyes—"will you pay the doctor and provide the nurse? Now that's generous of you, and no more than just either, for she's *your* wife, you know, now. It's like you, Roysten, and you're a good fellow."

"You thundering crocodile!" responded Captain Darrell, towering up to twice his usual size in the intensity of his contempt, "don't turn me sick! Did you keep the girl up there all night?"

Peter Fisher, by way of answer, related minutely all that had occurred.

"So, thanks to old Judith, and not to you, that the rats did not eat her alive! If she dies, won't you stand in the tallest sort of clover, my clever old friend? I'll go to your hanging with the greatest pleasure in life."

"Don't talk like that, Roysten!" cried the old man, piteously—"don't! She won't die! We'll nurse her back to health and strength—she shall want for nothing. Who is the nurse you are going to send, and when will you send her?"

"I'll send her to-day. As to who she is—ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. She is one of the best nurses that ever sat by a sick-bed, that's all you need to know. And remember you don't starve her while she's here—she isn't used to that sort of thing, mine ancient crony. She and the sick girl must have everything they

want—mind, Mr. Miser, *everything!* Don't let me hear any complaints when I come back."

"When you come back? Are you going away?"

"I'm going to take a run up to New York in the 'Raven.' Our cargo's discharged—all has gone well *this* bout, and the little craft stands in need of repairs. I'll leave her in the dry dock for a few weeks and enjoy myself in Gotham. I'll be back in five weeks at the uttermost, and hope to find our little girl up and about once more, and ready to recruit her health and spirits by a sea-voyage. And now, good-bye to you, old fellow! Look out for the nurse in the course of the evening."

Peter Fisher remained alone in his room, cowering over the fire, until the dull day wore itself out, and the duller night fell. It was quite dark before the nurse made her appearance—a nurse who strangely startled the old man, so young and duskily beautiful was she.

"I thought he would have sent an elderly party," gasped Mr. Fisher. "Why, you don't look much older than Estella yourself."

"I am three-and-twenty," answered the nurse, in a silvery, foreign-toned voice, "and I have had a great deal of experience. I am quite capable of nursing Miss Mallory."

"So Captain Darrell has told you all about her, I see. Have you known him long, my dear?" inquired the old man, with a cunning leer.

The great black eyes looked at him, solemn, shining.

"Long enough to know he never answers unnecessary questions, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Carlotta Mendez."

"Ah! a foreigner—I thought so."

"A Cuban, sir. Will you permit me to go to my patient?"

Mr. Fisher seized the hand-bell, and rang loudly. A moment, and Judith appeared.

"Here is the new nurse, old woman," snarled her master, with a vicious look. "She will take your place, and you will take yourself back to the kitchen. Get me my supper, and quick about it."

Judith and Carlotta surveyed each other with imper-
turbable countenances.

"This way, ma'am," said the old woman, turning down the passage to the sick-room.

"How is your patient to-night?" the new nurse asked.

"Sleeping just now, and as well as she ever will be in this world, I reckon."

"You think, then, she will die?"

Judith nodded grimly.

"Look for yourself, ma'am," she said, ushering her companion in. "Does that look like the face of a girl likely to recover?"

Carlotta bent over the bed. White as death itself Estella lay, and as still. The young nurse felt her pulse, listened to her breathing, laid her hand on the hot head, with an experienced air.

"I think you are mistaken," she said, slowly. "She is very low, but I think both life and reason will return; and I have nursed such cases as this before."

From that hour, Carlotta established herself mistress of the sick-room. The doctor looked in surprise, when he came, at the youthful and darkly beautiful face, and put her through a sharp cross-examination. All questions relating to her profession she answered clearly and intelligently, but all relating to herself she calmly ignored.

"If Mr. Fisher is satisfied, and if you find me competent to fulfill my duties, I do not see the necessity of relating my biography to a perfect stranger," she said, coldly transfixing him with her wonderful black eyes.

The doctor grunted and asked no more questions. That she was thoroughly competent, he soon saw. By night and by day she hovered constantly beside the sick-bed, sleepless and devoted, anticipating every wish—a very jewel of a nurse.

"You are a treasure, Madame Carlotta," the physician said to her, one day, in a burst of professional enthusiasm. "Estella will owe her recovery as much to your nursing as to my skill."

For Estella was recovering slowly but surely. Before the close of the first fortnight, the hazel eyes opened to calm life and reason once more—penc'd, and looked dreamily in the dark face bending over her.

"Who are you?" she had whispered, faintly.

"Your friend," answered the sweetest voice, it seemed

to the girl, she had ever heard; "but you are not to talk. You are to drink this, and go to sleep."

She obeyed—too feeble even to wonder—and slept long and soundly. When she again awoke, many hours after, the dark face was still there.

"I don't know you," she said. "Tell me your name."

"My name is Carlotta. I am your nurse. You have been ill."

"Ill, have I?" very faintly. "What has been the matter?"

"Brain fever; but you are better now. Only you must not talk until you have grown a little stronger."

Again Estella obeyed, through sheer weakness. But life and strength came rapidly, and beat strongly in her breast. Before the end of the third week she was able to sit up in bed and eat the dainty little messes the young nurse concocted with her own hands.

Memory returned with that new life, and slowly Estella remembered all the events of that horrible night. It seemed a long way off now, and with a thrill of terror she realized her present situation. Sick and a prisoner—in the power of Peter Fisher and Roysten Darrell—alone and friendless in the wide world. Where was Dick Derwent? What must he think of her? Was he, too, in the clutches of those merciless men?

She asked no questions—some vague intuition told her the owner of that dark, unsmiling face would answer none. She lay, and thought and thought, and realized fully all her helplessness and misery, until a sick despair took possession of her body and soul.

"Why did I not die?" she thought, wearily. "Others die for whom the world is bright, but I—I, who have nothing to live for, nothing to hope for, I grow well."

No; Estella had nothing to hope for. Peter Fisher's ward knew very little of that other radiant world, where all the misery of this lower life ends, and perfect joy begins. She was little better than a heathen, poor child, with a very vague idea of that blissful land where the crooked things of this earth are made straight and patient womanly martyrs receive their crown. It was all dark to her, lying there on that forlorn sick-bed—past help, past hope, past everything.

"I should like to see a copy of the Rockledge 'News,' Carlotta," she said, suddenly, one day to her nurse.

She was sitting up now, wan and white as a spirit, but daily growing stronger in spite of her despair. It was the first wish she had expressed, and her nurse hastened to gratify it. She left the room, and returned in a few moments with a recent copy of the paper.

Estella took it, glanced eagerly up and down its columns, and at length, amid the advertisements, found what she wanted. It was an offer of fifty dollars reward from the editor of the journal for any information of Richard Derwent, sub-editor, who had mysteriously disappeared on the night of the eleventh of May.

Her pale face grew a shade whiter. She laid down the paper, and looked at her nurse.

"What day of the month is this?" she asked.

"The second of June."

The girl uttered a low cry, and covered her face with her hands. Her worst fears were realized. Poor Dick was in the power of Roysten Darrell—like herself, a prisoner.

"It is time you returned to bed, Miss Mallory," Carlotta said, at length. "Let me undress you and put you back to bed. You must have your supper and go to sleep."

"I can't take any supper to-night," Estella said, mournfully. "I want to see Mr. Fisher."

The fathomless black eyes looked at her in surprise.

"Indeed! Well, I will tell Mr. Fisher as soon as you are in bed."

She helped her patient in, arranged the clothes, and quitted the room. Estella lay very still—white as the pillows—the brown eyes, the pale, patient face full of inexpressible despair.

The old man came at once, shrinking a little, hard as he was, from those mournful eyes. But there was no anger, more proach, in that sad, young face—the look was infinitely more touching to see.

"How do, Estella? You're better again. I'm glad of that," the old man said, shuffling uneasily.

"Yes, I am getting better," the girl said, slowly. "If my life was a happy one, I suppose I would die. Mr. Fisher, where is Dick Derwent?"

She asked the question so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that the old man started back.

"Dick Derwent?" he said, confusedly; "what do I know of him?"

"You know where he is, Mr. Fisher. Please don't try to deceive me now. He is a prisoner, in Roysten Darrell's power."

"Hey?" cried the startled master of Fisher's Folly. "How do you know that?"

"Because he has disappeared. There is a reward offered for any news of him, and no one but you and Roysten Darrell can have any object in spiriting him away. He disappeared on the night of the eleventh—the night on which—"

She paused, shuddering convulsively from head to foot.

"Yes, yes, yes!" said Peter Fisher, hastily. "Well, Estella, I don't know. Captain Darrell—Dare-devil Darrell—stops at nothing when his blood is up. He *may* have this young fellow a prisoner for what I can tell. But, if he has, of one thing I am certain, his release depends upon *you*."

"Upon me?"

"Consent to be Roysten Darrell's wife, and from that hour Richard Derwent is free."

She raised herself eagerly on her elbow, and looked at him.

"You swear this?" she cried. "If I consent to become the wife of Captain Darrell, Richard Derwent shall be set at liberty?"

"I swear it!" said Peter Fisher. "Consent, and he is a free man."

"Then I consent!" exclaimed Estella, her eyes flashing. "I will marry Roysten Darrell—for mind, I am *not* married to him now—on condition that, the day before the marriage, Dick Derwent is set at liberty."

"It is a bargain!" said the old man, eagerly. "He shall be freed, and you shall have proof of it under his own hand. But, remember, if you fail to keep your promise after—"

"I shall not fail! What does it matter what becomes of *me*?" she answered, with a strange laugh. "I would do more than that to set Dick at liberty. Dear old Dick!" she said, softly, "he loved me—the only being on earth

who ever did. It is the least I can do to sacrifice myself that he may escape."

"Then this is settled?" asked the old man, his little, greedy eyes gleaming. "You will remarry Roysten Darrell, in the presence of witnesses, on condition that he liberates Richard Derwent? And you swear not to deceive us—not to fail?"

"I swear! Keep *your* part of the compact, and I shall keep mine. I will marry Roysten Darrell."

Strange fire this in her eye—strange energy this in her voice. But Peter Fisher is blind and deaf, and only knows that the summit of his wishes is won.

They shake hands over it, and he leaves her and hobbles back to his room, rubbing his palms and chuckling hoarsely.

And Estella, left alone, turns her face to the wall and broods darkly, and never closes an eye the long night through.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THE sun was setting—a glorious summer sunset—on the sea. Estella Mallory sat alone in her room, alone by the window, and looked with dreary, listless eyes at the glorious sunburst in the west flooding earth and sea with crimson glory. Little pools amid the marshes turned to pools of blood. The soft evening wind came freshly in, and the fishermen's boats, glorified in the radiant sunset, flashed over the sparkling waves.

The girl sat idly, her thin hands folded, the large brown eyes strangely dull and weary.

"Will I ever see it like this again?" she thought. "Am I looking at the beautiful sunset for the last, last time? Is there a heaven beyond that gorgeous sky, and do they know how miserable and friendless I am, I wonder? In all this wide earth is there another lost, lost creature like me?"

There was a letter lying on her lap—a letter in the handwriting of Richard Derwent, received within the hour.

She took it up, and ran over its few brief lines for the dozenth time:

"DEAR ESTELLA,—They have told me all—they have set me free. I owe my liberty to you, and you have my

sincere thanks. In a day or two I will be at Fisher's Folly, hoping and trusting to see you. Until then, dearest Essie, farewell.

RICHARD DERWENT."

There was no date to this scant note, but the writing was surely Dick Derwent's familiar chirography.

No suspicion entered the girl's earnest, truthful mind that this note, and that other given her by the butcher's boy, were Roysten Darrell's clever forgeries.

"They have not told him of what is to take place tomorrow night, then," the girl thought—"my marriage. Well, better so—he will know all soon enough. And he will be sorry, too—poor Dick! The only one in all the world to be sorry for Estella."

There was a tap at the door. Before she could speak, it was opened, and Carlotta, the nurse, stood before her.

"Captain Darrell is down-stairs, Miss Mallory, and wishes to see you."

Estella arose instantly. An imperceptible shudder crept over her, and her face turned a shade paler, but she never hesitated. She went straight down-stairs, and into the dreary parlor, where Peter Fisher and the captain of the "Raven" sat.

"Ah, Estella, how are you?" said Captain Darrell, coming forward coolly with outstretched hands. "Glad to see you about again, and more than glad to hear the news Mr. Fisher has to tell. I don't bear any malice, my little girl, as I told you once before, but it's high time you listened to reason. I'll make you a capital husband, and your life will be one long dream of bliss on board the 'Raven.'"

The girl shrunk back, turning paler than before, and drew away, with a shiver, from his extended hand.

"You won't, won't you?" said Captain Darrell. "Rather hard on a fellow, on the eve of his wedding. I hope you won't flinch from the ceremony also, when the time comes."

"No," said Estella, speaking with an effort, "I shall not. Spare me until then, Captain Darrell. I will keep my word."

"Glad to hear it! You got that young chap's note?"

"Yes."

"I didn't tell him about that little affair of ours to-mor-

row night, you see—what was the use? He'll be here to see you in a day or two, I dare say, and will find you gone."

"Yes," said Estella, in a low, strange voice, "he will find me gone."

"You will be ready to-morrow evening, by eight o'clock. The Reverend Mr. Jacobs, of Rockledge, is coming to tie the Gordian knot, and half a dozen of friends with him. Before morning, the 'Raven' weighs anchor, and bears off Roysten Darrell and his bonny bride to fairer lands. Trust me, Estella, we'll have a free life and a merry one, and all the ink-smudged printers this side the Styx may go hang!"

Estella listened, cold and pale.

"May I go now?" she asked. "If you have nothing more to say, Captain Darrell, I should like to return to my room."

"You're in a deuce of a hurry. But go, if you want to, and try and recover your spirits and your red cheeks by to-morrow night. You are whiter than the foam of the sea."

She bowed slightly and left the room, going straight to her own. A strange, dull gleam burned in the brown eyes; the pale lips were set with resolute compression.

"It is easier to die," she thought, slowly—"it is easier to die at once. I should go mad and jump over the vessel's side before I had spent one day with that man. Yes, Roysten Darrell, I will fulfill my compact, and then—"

She looked out, with a tearless, rigid face, at the darkening sky, at the wide sea. Twilight was falling, gemmed with stars, and the evening wind sighed mournfully over the dreary marshes and meadows.

With a long, weary breath, the girl laid her head against the cool glass, and looked up at the starlit canopy.

"Where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest," she thought—"will such a sinner as I am ever enter that blissful land?"

It grew dark. She sat there moveless until the door opened and Carlotta entered with a light.

"Time you were in bed, Miss Mallory," said the young nurse. "It is past your usual hour, and you will catch cold in the draught of that window."

She rose immediately, with a prompt obedience that was

quite a new feature in her character, and began slowly to undress.

"Are you going to bed, too, Carlotta?" she asked.

"In half an hour, Miss Mallory. Mr. Fisher objects to our burning his candles."

She began to prepare her bed as she spoke. Since her coming she had always slept in her patient's room, on the old-fashioned lounge.

"Has Captain Darrell gone?" inquired Estella.

"I have just let him out, miss."

Estella asked no more questions; she went to bed, but not to sleep.

Carlotta arranged her couch—literally her couch—set the room in order, disrobed, blew out the light, and followed her example.

An hour passed—two—three. The old house was very still—only the complaining sea wind, and the racing of the rats overhead, were to be heard. Carlotta's regular breathing betokened peaceful slumber, but Estella lay, with wide-open, glittering eyes, waiting—waiting!

A loud-voiced clock down-stairs struck twelve. As the last stroke died away, she softly rose, drew on her stockings, wrapped herself in an old morning-dress, crossed the room softly, and bent above the nurse.

"Sound asleep," the girl thought. "Now or never is my time. Shall I light the candle? No—I can find my way in the dark."

It was not quite dark; the starlight lighted the room. From her table Estella took a small medicine bottle, capable of holding two ounces, and, grasping it tightly, tiptoed to the door, opened it gently and passed out.

The old door creaked weirdly, as it is in the nature of old doors to do at dead of night. Carlotta was the lightest of sleepers—would the noise arouse her? No; all remained still.

She turned and descended the stairs. They, too, creaked, as though bent on betraying her. The lower passage was in deepest darkness, but she groped her way along, without noise, to the door of Peter Fisher's sleeping-room. With her hand on the handle she paused. Was he asleep? Yes—regular and sonorous came his loud snores—she might enter without fear.

She turned the lock and went in. The old man lay

sleeping as soundly as though evil consciences were fables, looking ugly and grim in the pallid light.

One glance sufficed to tell her no noise she was likely to make would awake him. She crossed the room softly, and paused before a table upon which stood a medicine-chest.

It was not locked. She lifted the lid, peeped among the bottles, drew forth a large one, after some searching, filled with a dark liquid, and labeled "Laudanum—Poison."

As she did so, a slight noise, like the rustling of a woman's dress in the passage, made her start. She paused to listen, but all was still.

"Only the wind," she thought, "or a rat."

She drew the stopper out of the bottle and nearly filled her own vial. Her hand shook, and she spilled the liquid, and the face, on which the starlight shone, was deathly pale.

She replaced the bottle, closed the chest, stole to the door, shut it noiselessly, and, with the vial still tightly grasped, slowly made her way upstairs, and back to her own chamber. There lay Carlotta, her dark eyes sealed in sleep.

"Safe," whispered Estella, laying her hand upon her throbbing heart. "What would become of me if I had failed? I can defy you now, Roysten Darrell!" with a strange smile. "This little bottle is stronger than you. I will keep my word, but a darker bridegroom will claim your bride!"

She hid it away, and went back to bed. And scarcely had her head touched the pillow, when sleep took her, and wrapped her in merciful unconsciousness.

It was late when she awoke. Carlotta was moving silently about the room, and her breakfast lay spread upon a tray.

"Your wedding-day, Miss Mallory," the nurse said, with a strange smile. "High time to get up."

Her wedding-day!

Estella turned away her face for a moment, growing cold as ice in the warm June air. Only for a moment, then she arose, pale and impassive, her young face set and rigid as marble.

It seemed very easy to die in comparison to life with the man she hated and loathed, and no fear of the dread hereafter held her back.

The day passed—the hours dragged on. They were

merciful enough to leave her alone. They brought her her meals, but she tasted nothing. Eating and drinking were nothing to her now. Hidden in her bosom lay the vial—her one remaining hope.

The twilight fell. Again the sun had gone down red into the sea—glorious beyond the power of words to tell. Again the silver stars swung out, and a pale, young sickle moon gleamed among them. Again Estella sat and watched them—for the last time!

As the daylight faded entirely out, Carlotta entered, her arms full of white garments, that gleamed ghostly in the gloom.

"It is time you were dressing for your bridal, Miss Mallory," she said. "Here are your clothes, and I have come to help you to dress."

In what a strange, ringing tone she spoke! And when she lighted the candle, what a strange, streaming fire there was in her black eyes! what a hot, fierce glow on her sallow cheeks! Even Estella noticed it in that supreme moment.

"How oddly you look, Carlotta!" she said. "Is there anything the matter?"

Carlotta laughed—a weird, mirthless laugh.

"Only the excitement of a wedding. Such things always throw me into a fever. Come, it is past seven. The clergyman and the guests are in the parlor; the bridegroom will be here presently, and his bride must not keep him waiting."

She took forcible possession of the girl, combed out her fair, brown hair, and let it hang in a rippling shower of waves and curls over her shoulders.

Then she arranged the dress—a white muslin robe, the work of her own hands—a simple blonde veil, edged with lace, and wreathed with orange-blossoms.

"I made all myself," said Carlotta. "Look in the glass, my pretty bride, and praise my skill as a seamstress. Roysten Darrell will be proud of his bride to-night."

Again she laughed—that hard, mirthless laugh—and turned the girl to the little mirror. White as a vision—white dress, white veil, white face, white flowers—she looked like a corpse tricked out in bridal gear.

"There never was so pale a bride," said Carlotta; "but brides are always pale. A three-months' trip in the

'Raven,' with Captain Darrell, will bring back your lost roses."

Estella turned away from the glass.

"Carlotta," she said, "I have eaten nothing all day. I feel sick and faint. Will you fetch me some wine and a glass—a large glass?"

A strange request for a bride. But Carlotta turned to go at once.

"Hark!" she said, as she opened the door, "hear that?"

A sounding step, firm and heavy, crossed the lower hall; a deep, melodious bass voice rolled out among less sonorous tones.

"Captain Darrell," she said. "'The bridegroom has come.'

She flitted away with the words, returning in a moment with a bottle of port wine and a goblet.

"Thanks!" said Estella, calmly. "Leave it on the table, Carlotta, and give me ten minutes alone."

Carlotta obeyed.

Estella secured the door, and drew from her bosom the vial of laudanum.

"There is enough here for the strongest man alive," she thought; "more than enough for me!"

But she emptied it all into the goblet, nevertheless, with a steady hand. It filled it about one fourth. Then she took the wine-bottle and replenished it to the top. Still, with a steady hand, she lifted it up.

"And this is death!" she thought—"the fabled water of Lethe! This brown drink ends all the miseries of life, and sets me free!"

She raised it to her lips. But at the cold touch of the glass the strong young life within her leaped up in fierce refusal. She sat it down, untasted, trembling for the first time. At the same instant there came a soft knock at the door.

"It is I—Carlotta! Your uncle wishes to see you most particularly, and at once, in his room."

Estella could hear her flitting away. Again she lifted the goblet—again some invisible force pushed the fatal draught away.

"I will wait until I come back," she thought, with a

sick shudder of repulsion. "I will hear what he has to say."

She replaced it on the table, unfastened the door, and glided down to Peter Fisher's room.

* * * * *

In the parlor the few guests were assembled—the Reverend Mr. Jacobs among them. Silence and constraint reigned; every one felt there was something strange and abnormal about this wedding. Roysten Darrell waited a few minutes, yawned loudly in their faces, turned abruptly, and stalked out.

"I'll see Carlotta," he thought. "I feel more uneasy about her than I do about the other one. She's a very devil when her blood's up."

He ascended the stairs in search of her. But the rooms into which he looked were all empty. Estella's came last—he recognized it at once—but it, too, was deserted.

"She's with the old man, I suppose. What's that on the table—wine? Upon my honor, the little girl knows how to prime herself for her part! I'll try your port, my dear, and wait here for your reappearance. It mayn't be quite *de rigueur*, but ceremony be blowed!"

He threw himself into a chair, and coolly took up the goblet of poisoned wine.

"Here's to your very good health, my pretty bride, and to your jolly bridegroom!"

He raised it to his lips, and drained it to the bottom. The last mouthful he spat out with a wry face.

"Bah!" he said, "it's not fit for pigs! Logwood and red ink!"

He took out a cigar, lighted it hastily, and began to smoke. Still the minutes flew by, and no one came. The clock down-stairs struck eight.

"The fatal hour!" thought Roysten Darrell. "I wonder where's the bride?"

As if his thought had evoked her, the white figure came flying up the stairs, pausing on the threshold in blank amaze at sight of Roysten Darrell. Then, quick as lightning, her eyes flashed upon the goblet. It was empty!

She understood all. She paused before him, her blood turning to ice.

"Come in, my dear, come in!" cried Captain Darrell. "I have no business here, I know; but it looked cosy, and

your wine looked tempting. I took a chair and helped myself."

"Helped yourself!" Estella repeated, mechanically.

"Drank your glass of wine, my dear, and beastly stuff it is! I'll give you better vintage on board the 'Raven.' Come, it is the time. Take my arm, and let us go down."

Helplessly, she obeyed—numb with terror. As they turned to descend, they met Carlotta face to face. She, too, had heard Roysten Darrell's last words.

"You drank Estella's wine?" she asked, in a strange, metallic voice.

"Yes; what difference does it make to *you*? There's plenty left, such as it is. Come along, Carlotta, and be in at the death!"

In at the death! Ominous phrase! Already the poison was beginning its work—already a dull, sick torpor was stealing over the strong man.

"I don't know what is the matter with me," he said, impatiently. "I am turning as sick as a dog, and I feel half asleep."

There was no reply. Frozen with terror—speechless, paralyzed—Estella allowed herself to be led in. Already the victim staggered as he walked.

The lights, the faces swam in a red mist before the bride as they entered the parlor. What had she done—what had she done? She stood there with a ghastly face—waiting—waiting.

They took their places—the clergyman opened his book.

A leaden pallor was creeping over the ruddy face of Captain Darrell; his eyes were growing dark and dull.

The first words were spoken; but ere the ceremony had well begun, the bridegroom reeled like a falling pine, and dropped like a stone at their feet.

A long, wild shriek rang through the house. Then Estella turned and fled frantically from the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

CARLOTTA'S WARNING.

IN a moment all was wildest confusion. No one heeded the flying bride—all gathered around the fallen bridegroom. They lifted him up, ghastly as a dead man.

"He is poisoned!" cried a clear voice—"he has swallowed a dose of laudanum large enough to kill the strongest man alive! Send for the doctor at once!"

It was Carlotta who spoke, her dark face ashen with terror.

The physician who had attended Estella chanced to be one of the guests. He stepped forward at once.

"How do *you* know that?" he asked, suspiciously.

"What does that matter, so long as I know it?" cried Carlotta, her black eyes flashing. "I tell you he drank over an ounce and a half of laudanum!"

"Did he take it purposely? Did he intend to commit suicide?" inquired the startled physician.

"No; he took it in a mistake. Why don't you do something for him?" she broke out passionately. "While you talk and gape, you will let him die at your feet."

"It may be too late, nevertheless. Who will ride to Rockledge and fetch me a stomach-pump?"

There were two or three eager volunteers. The doctor calmly selected one.

"My horse is at your service—don't spare him. Ride like the wind—life or death depend on it."

The messenger departed. They bore the drugged man to Mr. Fisher's own room and laid him upon the bed. Then, in the lull which followed, and in which nothing was done, the old man thought of his ward.

"Where is Estella?" he asked, suspiciously.

"She has fled to her own room," answered Carlotta, in a strangely calm voice. "I am going to her there."

"Does she—"

Peter Fisher stopped in sudden horror at his own thought, and looked at the dark face of the creole nurse. But that colorless face told nothing.

"Go to her!" he said, hurriedly. "See what she is about, Carlotta. In the confusion, she may try to escape."

Without a word, Carlotta obeyed. She went straight to the bride's room, her face set in that locked, stony calm.

The door stood wide, and there, crouched in the furthest corner—pale, panting, with wild, dilated eyes, and the look of a stag at bay—stood Estella.

The creole paused before her, shut the door, and black eyes and brown met in one long, fixed look.

" Well," said Carlotta, at last, " you have done your work. I hope you are satisfied? Your victim lies lifeless below. Poisoner! murderer! is your hatred satisfied at last?"

The white hands flew up and covered the whiter face. She uttered a long, wailing cry of despair.

" I never meant it—I never meant it! Oh, Carlotta, as Heaven hears me, I never meant it for *him*! I mixed the poisoned wine for myself. How was I to know he would enter my room and drink it?"

" I believe you," said Carlotta, coldly; " and, *but* that I believe you, I would have denounced you on the spot. Do you think I did not know as well as yourself what you intended to do? Why, you little imbecile, I followed you last night—I saw you steal the laudanum, and I knew in a moment how you intended your bridal to end. When you asked me for the wine, an hour ago, do you suppose I could not surmise what it was for? Ah, bah! I read you like a book, and you had not the courage to drink it, little coward, when mixed. You left it until the last moment—you went down to the old man's room, and *he*, Roysten Darrell, came in here in your absence, and drank the poisoned draught. I knew it all—I knew it when you left this room together, and still I did not speak. Do you wish to know why?"

" Yes," said Estella, recoiling at the suppressed fury in her voice and face.

" *Because I love him.* Because I worship him with a mad idolatry that you, poor little milk and water school-girl, can never dream of! Because I am his wife—do you hear—his wedded wife! And I would sooner see him dead at my feet than even for an hour the husband of another! I love him as only we women of the passionate South ever love; and he must have been blind and mad to think for a moment I could consent to his scheme. Why, you poor little wretch! I had the poisoned drug ready for you myself, ever since I came here, and the hour that saw you *his* bride would have seen you die by my hand. You tried to save me the trouble, and failed. But better as it is—a thousand times better as it is than to behold him wedded to another! In death, at least, he is mine!"

Estella hid her poor, pale face, with convulsive sobs.

"It is dreadful—it is horrible! Oh, Carlotta! can nothing be done? What will become of me if he dies?"

"If he dies I will denounce you as his murderer! You, Estella Mallory, as surely as we stand here, if he dies, I will denounce you, and you shall suffer for your crime."

"But I never meant it!" cried the girl, in wild affright.
"Carlotta, you *know* I never meant it!"

"That is nothing," Carlotta replied, with somber dignity; "the deed is done. In a few hours the result will be known. Those few hours are yours, to do with as you will. In your place *I* should not wait to be arrested."

Estella gazed at her breathlessly.

"Carlotta, what do you mean?"

"Little fool!" said Carlotta, with a look of dark scorn, "have you no brains? Look at those windows, not eight feet off the ground; look at those sheets and quilts, easily torn and knotted together, and ask yourself what I mean! The world is wide, life is sweet; the meanest reptile that ever crawled will make an effort for its life."

Still Estella sat and gazed at her in breathless wonder.

What manner of creature was this who one instant threatened to denounce and deliver her up to justice and the next showed her the means of escape?

Carlotta answered that look.

"Still far wide!" she said, with a hard laugh. "Still in a trance of amaze! Listen to me, little idiot, and understand, if you can. The dose was too large; they have sent for a stomach-pump. Roysten Darrell, amid ten chances of death, has one of life. If he lives he will comprehend all, and will all the more doggedly insist on your marrying him. I know the man—oppose him, and his purpose grows as adamant. If he dies, and you are to be found, I will denounce you. Life or death for him brings equal danger to you; but if he lives, and you escape, he returns to me. I have warned you. Now do as you please."

Without giving the girl a chance to reply, Carlotta turned abruptly and quitted the room.

For upward of five minutes, Estella remained like one in a trance. Then the full danger of her situation burst upon her; the full meaning of Carlotta's warning came home; the full force of her hint to escape made itself understood.

Yes, life was sweet while one chance of liberty remained. She would take her at her word—she would fly!

She sprung up, a new being, resolute and eager. Her first act was to secure the door; the next to raise one of the windows and look out. It was not so very high, and she, who had been ready to take her own life little better than an hour ago, might surely risk broken limbs now.

The night favored her—calm, warm, starlight. Westward spread the gray majesty of the sea. Eastward lay the lonely marshes and deserted, winding road. Southward slept the quiet town of Rockledge, its lights looking faint and far away.

"And Dick is there!" Estella thought. "Oh, if he were only here to help me now!"

She rapidly began her preparations. Every second was precious beyond price. She took off the white dress, the veil, the wreath, the gloves and slippers, and attired herself for her journey. A suit of gray merino had been provided for wearing on board the "Raven." She put this on, wrapping herself in a warm shawl. Strong walking-shoes, and a little gray straw hat, with a bright wing, completed her costume.

In all, it had not taken her ten minutes to dress. The only part of her bridal trappings she retained was a little gold chain and cross and a couple of rings—one of plain gold, the other set with pearls.

The simple jewels had belonged to her mother, and were hers of right; but Peter Fisher had never yielded them up until to-night.

"I will keep them," she thought. "I have no money, and if the worst comes to the worst, I can sell them for food. If my mother were alive she would not keep them and see me starve."

Was there anything else? She looked around the room. Yes, her book! It, too, had been her mother's, and it contained a lock of that dead mother's hair.

She took it off the table—a little volume, bound in purple velvet, with tarnished clasps and corners, containing a text of Scripture for every day in the year.

It opened at the fly-leaf. There was writing upon it—writing pale and faded—that turned the tide of Estella's destiny. She looked at the dim, pale letters:

"HELEN MALLORY,
To her beloved sister, Estella,
No. — Poplar St., Chelsea, Mass.,
March 18, 18—."

The date was three years before Estella was born. The faded scrawl flashed upon her now like a burst of sudden light.

"Why not go there," she thought, "to my mother's sister—to my aunt? She is still alive—still in the same place—the old homestead. Mr. Fisher told me so to-night, and that he was going to write to her of my marriage. For my mother's sake—the sister she loved—she will surely befriend me."

Her eyes lighted, her cheeks flushed. New hope kindled in her hopeless heart. What did it matter, in that instant, that she was penniless—that she knew about as much the way to Chelsea as to Copenhagen? Hopeful sixteen saw light and liberty at last.

She hid the precious volume in her bosom with her cross and chain, and went to work upon her ladder.

In a quarter of an hour the sheets, strong and coarse in material, were torn in strips, knotted firmly together, fastened within to a strong hook in the wall, and flung out of the window to the ground.

All was now complete. She took no bundle—she would hamper herself with nothing that could obstruct her flight.

She paused, pale and breathless, a moment to listen. Down-stairs she could hear the tramping of feet, the hurrying to and fro; upstairs she could hear the noisy scampering of the rats.

She clasped her hands, and looked up at the star-gemmed sky.

"Save me, oh, Lord!" she prayed. "Help a helpless orphan girl escaping from her foes!"

With that earnest, half-breathed prayer, she made her way through the window and laid hold of her ladder.

If it should break! But her weight was light—the resistance was little. She was on the ground almost in an instant—free!

She turned and fled, running breathlessly, headlong, over fields and marshes. She reached the high-road; sh•

turned her face resolutely from Rockledge, in the opposite direction.

"Brooklyn is but seventy miles off," she thought. "The first step to Chelsea is to reach Brooklyn. Good-bye, dear old Dick! We may never meet again."

One brief, backward glance at the wide sea, at the lonesome marshes, at the long, low, gloomy old house where she had suffered so much—at the darker "Raven," lying, like a huge bird of ill-omen as it was, in its sheltered cove—at the distant lights of Rockledge, twinkling like pale stars—and then off and away like the wind.

CHAPTER IX.

ESTELLA'S FLIGHT.

AWAY along the deserted country road, past swelling meadows and lonely fields, past dark and silent farm-houses, Estella flew. She ran until she could run no longer; then, panting and exhausted, she paused, nearly a mile from Fisher's Folly, and leaned against a way-side tree to draw breath.

She was out of sight of the sea and the marshes. Winding and winding away, until it lost itself in a starry belt of horizon, went the winding, dusty road—the road that led to liberty.

It was almost midnight now, and very still. The inexpressible hush of night and slumber lay over the quiet earth. Only the bright stars kept vigil, and a pale, young crescent moon sailed slowly up the purple vault through a sea of misty white clouds.

"Have they missed me yet, I wonder?" thought Estella. "Will that strange creature, Carlotta, tell them of my flight, and set them on my track? And is Roysten Darrell to live or die? Oh, if I only knew that!"

She started up and hurried on again, like the hunted creature she was. On, and on, and on, that long, interminable road, feeling neither faintness nor fatigue, in her burning eagerness to escape.

She met no one. She had the long, lonely road all to herself—poor, friendless waif, adrift on the world!

Morning was dawning. Slowly the stars began to pale—slowly the moon waxed dim and melted away—slowly the

first pink cloud of the sunrise blushed in the eastern sky. Brighter and brighter grew those lines of crimson glimmer; one by one the birds awoke and began twittering drowsily in their nests. The cattle, asleep in the way-side fields, lifted their dull heads. Signs of life everywhere awoke with the awakening day. Farm-houses and farm-yards were astir; the houses were growing more and more numerous, and Estella felt she was drawing near a village.

"It must be H——," she thought, "and I am nearly ten miles from Fisher's Folly. Sixty long, long miles yet before Brooklyn is reached."

She sighed wearily. These ten miles were beginning to tell upon one unused to lengthy walks. Her limbs ached, her feet were sore, and she felt faint and sick from inanition and want of food.

The few early pedestrians she met stared at her, and looked back at the pale and jaded face and weary walk.

To avoid them, and obtain a brief rest, she turned into a field, through which a sparkling brook ran, and threw herself on the yielding grass.

"How soft it feels!" she murmured; "how cool, how tender! Mother Nature—the only mother I ever knew."

She removed her hat, bathed her face and hands, and smoothed her hair. Next she took off her shoes and stockings, bathed her blistered feet, and arose, feeling infinitely rested and refreshed.

"If I only had something to eat!" she thought. "I feel as though I could walk all day."

She had half a dozen pennies in her pocket. She counted over her scanty hoard with wistful eyes.

"Poor Dick! the last of his last gifts—a bright silver half dollar," she murmured. "At least it will buy me a bun for breakfast. I will go into the village and find out if I am on the right road to Brooklyn."

She walked briskly along, relieved and refreshed by her bath, and reached the straggling outskirts of the village as the church clock was striking seven. The bustle and stir of the new day had begun—shops were opening, house doors stood wide, many people passed her up and down the dusty street. She stepped into the first bake-shop she met, and laid down her handful of pennies.

"Ten cents' worth of buns, please," she said to a fat woman behind the counter.

The woman did them up in paper and handed them to her, looking curiously at the pale young face.

"You're a stranger here, ain't you?" she asked familiarly. "I know most every one in H—, but I don't know *you*."

"Yes," said Estella, "I'm a stranger. I'm going to Brooklyn, if I can find the way."

"Find the way! Why, Lor'! you don't mean to walk it?"

"Yes; it is straight on, isn't it?"

"It's straight on, sure enough," said the woman, with a laugh; "but it's rather a piece—sixty miles from H—. Hadn't you better take the stage? It passes at noon."

"No, thank you," replied the girl, with a sigh. "I must walk. Good-morning."

She passed out of the shop into the sunlit morning. Sixty miles to Brooklyn, and Brooklyn only the first stage of that weary journey to Chelsea. What a wild-goose chase it looked! Wandering on an unknown journey to a strange land, as it seemed to her, in search of a relative she had never seen, who might be dead for what she knew; or, if alive and still at the old place, a relative who might scornfully refuse to acknowledge the wandering vagrant's claim. Her heart sunk in her bosom like lead.

"It is all useless, all in vain!" she thought, with a despairing sob. "I had better lie down by the road-side and die. What will become of me? Why was I ever born, since I have no home, no parents, no friends no place in the wide world at all?"

There had been a time when Estella had thought it a fine thing to be let loose upon the world to shift for one's self, to be a heroine, a second Jane Eyre, adrift on the moors—but not now. The bitter reality of that most bitter fact, that she was homeless, houseless, a lost waif, wrecked upon the world, came home to her with its full despair.

But she wandered on. Sixteen years will not readily lie down and die, while one glimmer of hope remains. She wandered on, eating her buns by the way once the village was left behind, and the dusty stretch of road lay long and bright before her once more, losing itself in the sunlit sky.

"I used to wish I had been born a gypsy," thought Estella, with a hysterical little laugh at her past folly, "free

and happy, to stroll over the world, and sleep under waving trees, and tell fortunes in a scarlet cloak and blue petticoat. I am getting my wish now, and I don't seem to care for it; and yet if I had company I think I should prefer it to life at Fisher's Folly. If Dick were only with me! But even to be alone—to be like this—is a hundred times better than being the wife of Roysten Darrell."

The day wore on—the sun sailed higher—noon came, scorching, burning. Estella was growing unutterably weary, and yet she had hardly walked six miles. She had reached and passed a second village larger than the first, but she had not stopped—every hour of delay was an hour lost. She had plodded wearily on, hot and dusty, sunburned and tired, hungry and thirsty, and faint. The quiet high-road was again reached, with swelling meadows, spreading endlessly away on either hand, green and cool. Still on, still on, only pausing once beside a sparkling way-side well for a long, long draught; then again on, eating the last of her buns as she walked. The stage-coach from H— to Brooklyn rattled past her in the early afternoon, filled with passengers, and, ah, with what wistful, hopeless eyes the girl looked at the lumbering conveyance bowling along so swiftly to the goal she longed to gain!

The afternoon was drawing to a close—her long day of ceaseless walking was coming to an end. Lengthy shadows fell athwart the road; the western sky was growing luminous with the splendor of the sinking sun; farm-laborers passed her on their homeward way. She heeded nothing of it all. Her head and eyes ached until she seemed growing blind; her blistered feet were like leaden weights; every bone in her body seemed a separate agony. Her throat felt parched and dry; the solid ground seemed heaving beneath her feet; she felt she must drop down and lie where she fell. Fatigue and want of food were rapidly telling on this poor little wandering waif.

As she staggered on, half blind with pain and weariness, an open barn-door caught her eye. It was nearly filled with hay. No one seemed to be near. It looked cool and inviting. She tottered rather than walked forward, entered, made her way to the darkest and remotest corner, sunk down in a heap, and in five minutes was sleeping as though she were dead.

That merciful sleep wrapped her for hours. Once, long

after midnight, she awoke; all was dark, and the silence of the grave reigned. Too weary to feel either fear or loneliness in that strange and lonely place, she turned over, and slumber took her again in its blessed embrace.

The sun was shining brightly, when, for the second time, she awoke. She arose on her elbow, drowsy and confused, and with an aching sense of unutterable weariness from head to foot. Those poor little feet felt sore and blistered, her joints felt stiff and numb, and she put back her tossed hair, and gazed around, with a dull sense of pain and bewilderment.

"Where am I?" Estella thought. "What place is this?"

And then memory came back like a flash, and she remembered all. She arose stiffly, cramped and unrefreshed, from her hard bed, smoothed her hair, shook out her dress, and, kneeling down, said her simple morning prayer.

"Take care of me, oh, Lord!" prayed poor Estella, "for in all this cruel world there is no one to care whether I live or die."

She walked to the door. If she could only pass out, as she had entered, unobserved! But it was not to be.

Face to face, on the threshold, she encountered a stalwart young man. Both recoiled and stood staring.

"The—deuce!" said the young man. "Who are you?"

Estella stood trembling—the pale picture of guilt. The young man eyed her in surprise and suspicion.

"Who are you?" he reiterated. "And what are you doing here?"

"Nothing, please," the girl faltered. "I have done no harm—indeed, indeed, I have not! I only slept on the hay last night."

"Slept on the hay! Do you mean to say you have been all night in the barn?"

"Yes, please," still more falteringly. "I was very tired; I had walked all day; I could go no further, and so I—I saw the door open, and went in and lay down, and fell asleep before I knew it. Don't be angry, please—I don't think I have done any harm."

"Good Lord!" cried the young farmer, "listen to her! No harm! Why, you'll get your death, whoever you are! A young girl sleeping in such a place as that! Why the dickens didn't you come to the house and ask mother to let you stay there?"

. Estella lifted her eyes for the first time—those pathetic, liquid brown eyes. It was a rough face, this young farmer's, but a good one, and two kindly gray eyes stared at her in frank wonder. Then she looked down again, and a lovely, flitting color rose in her pale face.

"I had no money," she said, simply. "How could I ask?"

"Money be—darned! We don't keep an inn. What's your name?"

"Estella Mallory."

"And where do you come from?"

"From Rockledge," answered the girl, in whose truthful nature deception was unknown.

"Whew! You don't mean to say you've walked all that?"

"Yes, sir."

"And where are you going, pray?"

"To Brooklyn, if I can. I am trying to find my friends."

"Have you friends in Brooklyn?"

"I have friends further on. Please let me pass—it is time I was going."

"Not just yet," said the young man, resolutely; "not without your breakfast. Here—come along with me!"

He led the way in long strides without more ado. Estella followed him across the road, to a commodious farmhouse, through whose open door she could see a bounteous breakfast-table spread.

A comfortable-looking matron met them at the door, and gazed wonderingly at her son's pale companion.

"Here, mother," said the young man, "give this girl her breakfast. She's going on to Brooklyn, and—didn't I hear you say Deacon Miles was going up to Brooklyn today?"

"Yes; but he's gone, I reckon."

"I'll step across and see. Go in, my girl, and eat your breakfast. You look as though you needed it. Make her comfortable, mother, and don't bother her with questions until I come back."

He strode off, whistling. The woman looked at her son's protégée from head to foot, but not unkindly, while poor Estella hung her head, mortified and ashamed.

"Come in," said the woman, gently. "You do look beat out. Here, sit down, and eat as much as you can."

She placed a chair at the table, and poured out a cup of fragrant coffee. She asked no questions, and Estella was a great deal too hungry to stand upon ceremony.

She sat down at once, and eat and drank with keenest relish. Before she had finished her meal the young man was back.

"It's all right," he said, with a nod to his mother. "The deacon's going, and he'll make room for her. Don't hurry yourself, you know; but, as soon as you've finished, come along with me."

"I have finished, thank you," said Estella, rising; "and I am very, very much obliged."

"Not a bit! Come along."

She followed him out, down the road, and paused with him before a house at whose gate a horse and wagon stood. A fat, good-humored-looking man sat in the front seat, holding the reins.

"Here's the girl, deacon," said the young farmer. "She isn't quite a ton weight. Now, my lassie, pile in."

"But—" Estella faintly began.

"All right! all right!" exclaimed the farmer, impatiently. "The deacon's going to Brooklyn, and he's going to give you a lift. In with you! My time's precious."

He hustled her into the back seat, and before the bewildered Estella could fully realize it, the light wagon was rattling merrily along over the sunlit country road.

She gave a backward glance, and saw her sunburned champion trudging swiftly back to his breakfast.

"That's John Styles, my dear," quoth the deacon, "and the best young man I ever knew. How lucky he chanced to come across you this morning! Slept all night in his hay-barn, he tells me, and meant to walk all the way to Brooklyn. You never could do it, my dear—never! What are you leaving home for?"

"I have no home," Estella said, mournfully—"no rightful home. The person I lived with at Rockledge was very unkind to me—so unkind that I had to run away."

The old man shook his head.

"Bad, bad, bad!" he said. "A young girl could hardly do worse. And where are you going?"

"I have an aunt in Chelsea, Massachusetts; I am going

to her if I can ever find the way. Perhaps *you* know, sir? Will you kindly tell me what I must do when I get to Brooklyn?"

The trembling eagerness of the question—the tears in the large, earnest eyes—touched the old man.

"You poor, unfortunate baby!" he said. "It's a shame and a sin to have any one so young and so pretty tossing loose about the world like this. How will you get there? Why, you'll cross over to New York, and go down to the pier and buy your ticket, and get on board the steamer. *That's* what you'll do. The boat leaves at six. You can start this evening."

"Thank you, sir. And will the steamer take me to Boston?"

"Not direct. Never mind; I'll fix that. Have you any money?"

"No, sir," blushing hotly; "but I have a gold chain and cross. They were my mother's. I meant to sell them to pay my way."

"Poor child! Well, don't talk about it now. Try and go to sleep again. You look fitter for a sick-bed than traveling about. I'll see that everything's right. I have a girl of my own—your age, too, but not half so pretty—and I know how I should feel if she were knocking about like you. Go to sleep, and I'll send you to Chelsea all right."

The girl obeyed, worn out in body and mind. Her head drooped heavily against the hard back of the wagon, and sleep, the pitiful, took her once more, and folded her in peaceful unconsciousness. The sudden stoppage of the wagon aroused her. She started up, broad awake, and found herself alone in the vehicle. A rough-looking boy held the horse's head, and they stood outside the door of a public-house. It was past noon, and the day had changed while she slept. Dark clouds scudded over the sky, and the damp, rising wind gave promise of speedy rain.

"Where is he?" asked Estella, terrified. "Where has he gone?"

"He's here, my dear," replied the cheery voice of the deacon, appearing at the door. "Come, it's two o'clock, and high time you had some dinner. Get down."

"But I am not hungry, thank you."

"No matter—you will be, and there may be no time to

spare when we reach Brooklyn. Get down at once, and take a cup of tea."

He was not to be refused. He assisted her out, and led her into the house, and into a room where a dinner-table was spread, and a woman presiding.

"Now, then," said the deacon, "the sooner you let us have dinner, Mrs. Beers, the better."

Dinner was served immediately—beefsteak and potatoes, with tea and apple-tart to follow. Estella scarcely touched anything; her head throbbed, her limbs ached—every joint was sore and stiff. She was glad when it was over, and they were back in the wagon.

"How long before we reach Brooklyn?" she timidly inquired.

"In two hours or less. I'll take you straight to the city, and see you safely on board the boat."

"But the trouble. You are very, very kind; but it is too much to ask."

"You haven't asked, my dear," said the good-humored old deacon. "I do it for my own peace of mind. Why, that pale face of yours would haunt me the rest of my life-time if I deserted you in that big, bad city. And besides, where's the use of being a professed Christian and a deacon in the church if we don't act up to it? Don't you fret, my little girl; I'll see you safely through."

There was no reply—Estella's heart was too full for words. Ah! all the world were not Peter Fishers and Roy-sten Darrells, and the Father of the orphan had heard her prayer, and taken care of His helpless child.

The afternoon wore on, darkening fast. The threatening rain would fall before night; and Estella shivered as the damp wind struck her. Would she be really safe this night, or would she be houseless and adrift in the storm?

They reached Brooklyn before five, and Estella's head reeled with the magnitude and bustle of the City of Churches. The deacon did not stop; they crossed the Fulton Ferry at once, and plunged into the noise, and bustle, and uproar of mighty New York.

"What do you think of *this*, my dear?" shouted her companion, above the din. "Goes a *leetle* ahead of Rock ledge, doesn't it?"

But the girl was incapable of reply. Pale and frightened,

she gazed around her, deafened, stunned. The old man laughed at her terrified face.

"I don't think you like it much better than I do myself, and yet I suppose these people prefer these horrid streets to the peaceful country. They're to be pitied, I think; but it takes all sorts of folks to make a world."

The country gig rattled up West Street to the particular pier he wanted. Calling a boy to take charge of the vehicle, he helped Estella out, left her standing in a quiet spot, and approached the ticket-office. In a moment he was back beside her.

"Come on board now," he said. "Here's your ticket for Boston. Not a word—this is opposition time, and it only cost a trifle. This way."

He led her to the ladies' cabin, at first sight of which abode of splendor she literally gasped for breath. A great many ladies were moving about or seated, and the deacon took his charge to a vacant sofa, and placed her there.

"Now, then," he said, "I've done all for you I can do, and I don't think you'll haunt me for neglecting my duty. I'll speak to the stewardess about you, and she'll find you a berth. At six to-morrow morning you'll reach Newport; there you'll take the cars for Boston. Once you get to Boston, ask the first policeman you meet to put you in a car for Chelsea—you understand?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Tell the conductor of the car where you want to get out. Have you your aunt's street and number?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're all right, then. Now, good-bye and God bless you!"

He gave her hand a squeeze and hurried away, and once more the desolate wanderer was alone. She covered her face, and her tears fell.

"How good he is!" she thought; "and I may never see him again! Ah, what a happy girl his daughter must be!"

There was little time for tears, little chance for loneliness. As the deacon had said, it was opposition time, and the boat was literally crowded with passengers.

The pale little country-girl sat and gazed around her, with wide, wondering brown eyes, at the numbers and gay

dresses of the ladies. How much at home they all seemed, flitting hither and thither, laughing, chatting, and she—she was literally afraid to stir!

The boat moved off from her moorings. The summer day had closed, wet and windy, the rain dashed against the cabin-windows, and the long gale sighed over the Sound. But within the ladies' cabin all was brightness and pleasant bustle. The lamps were lighted, the ladies tripped about, gentlemen came and went, stewardesses sped swiftly hither and thither with refreshments—all was new and novel.

But Estella's head throbbed with that dull, torturing pain—her limbs still ached. In the cosy heat of the cabin she felt chilled to the bone.

Her head sunk heavily against the back of the sofa—her burning eyes closed. Again sleep, that was almost stupor, took her, and everything around her was blotted out.

A sound shaking awoke her. She opened her eyes and sat up, and stared vacantly into the face of a young mulatto woman.

"Newport!" said the woman, sharply. "The boat will touch the wharf in five minutes. Wake up!"

She hurried away. Estella started to her feet, still bewildered.

Ladies, wrapped warmly up, and laden with bags and baskets, hurried by her and out to the gangway. Mechanically, the girl arose and followed the crowd. Not a moment too soon—they were already at their moorings, and the rush for the cars had begun.

Carried along, restless—whither, she knew not, still only half awake—she found herself on the wharf, pushed on board the cars, amid a din and tumult that might have shamed Babel. A vacant seat, by some fortunate chance, was near. She dropped into it, her breath quite taken away.

"You look as though you were half asleep still," said a voice at her elbow—a laughing voice. "It is rather confusing, this being routed out of bed in the gray and dismal dawn. Are you alone?"

Estella looked at the speaker—a handsome, well-dressed young woman, who occupied the inside of the seat, and who was regarding her curiously.

"Am I alone?" repeated Estella, a little dazed. "Yes,

all alone. Please, where are we? and where are we going now?"

" We are at Newport, and we are going to Boston, I hope, if nothing happens. Do you want to go to Boston?"

" I want to go to Chelsea?"

" Chelsea! Oh, you're all right, then, and very fortunate in having secured a seat. How the cars are crowded, to be sure—half the poor wretches will have to stand. That comes of opposition lines and cheap traveling. Do you belong to Chelsea?"

" No. Rockledge, New York."

" Ah! I don't know it. You're sick, ain't you? You do look dreadful miserable!"

Estella pressed her hand to her burning forehead. That ceaseless, terrible pain was still there; but this morning she seemed to be one unutterable pain from head to foot.

" My head aches," she said, confusedly. " It feels all wrong and stupid, somehow. I'm not used to traveling—to being exposed. I'm afraid I'm going to be ill!"

Her companion drew back a little, with a look of alarm.

" It's not catching, is it? I thought you looked sick when you came on board last night. It's not fever, or small-pox, or anything?"

" No," replied Estella, drowsily; " only I'm tired, and I think I've caught cold. I ache all over, and my head burns. I didn't know I was sick before."

And then her voice died away, and the poor head dropped, and that dull stupor came over her again, and she saw and heard nothing distinctly.

Some one came and took her ticket and spoke to her, and there was a great deal of noise, and a sickening, uneasy motion everywhere; but nothing was real—nothing was distinct. She saw and heard as we see and hear in a dream.

Presently, she was standing on the platform, borne along once more by the crowd. All around her din and tumult, uproar and confusion. She stood lost, dazed, stupefied.

" Do you know the way to Chelsea? What on earth ails the child? Shall I put you on a Chelsea car?"

She lifted her heavy eyes, and saw the face of her late companion—the lady of the train.

" Yes, please. No. — Poplar Street."

She remembered the street and number dimly, but she

was incapable of further effort. The lady drew her impatiently along.

"Come this way—quick! I never saw such a bewildered face in all my life, and you're as ill as you can be. Have you any money?"

"Yes—no; I'm going to sell my cross. That will take me."

"Gracious me! is the girl an escaped lunatic? I never heard anything like this in all my life. I'll put you on board the car, and here's a dime to pay your fare. I declare, if you have any friends, they ought to be ashamed of themselves."

"I have no friends," said Estella, slowly. "I ran away; I am all alone."

Her companion eyed her with a whimsical mixture of compassion and distrust, but just then, their particular car appearing, she motioned the conductor, with an air of intense relief.

An instant later, and Estella was on board and seated, and the lady was speaking a hurried word to the conductor.

"She is a perfect stranger, and utterly incapable of taking care of herself. She wants to go to No. — Poplar Street. Let her down as near it as possible, and direct her which way to go."

The man nodded, and the car rattled on. They crossed the bridge; they rattled on again. Directly the car stopped, and the conductor tapped Estella on the shoulder.

"You get out here," he said; "turn down this way, and you are in Poplar Street. Go along up until you come to No. —."

He helped her off, and left her standing in the street. She stood a second and then turned as he had told her, and walked into Poplar Street.

Looking at the houses as she walked along, she came at last to the number she wanted—a large, white house, with cool, green blinds, and a couple of green trees in front.

She ascended the painted steps and rang the bell. While she waited she leaned against the door-post to keep from falling. A strange dizziness made her head reel and her eyes half blind with the intensity of pain. A drizzling rain was falling, but she never felt it; she shivered in the summer wind without knowing it.

CHAPTER X.

HELEN MALLORY.

THE door opened, after a weary while, it seemed to the waiter, and the face of an elderly woman, framed in a black cap, looked out.

"What is it?" a sharp voice asked.

Estella lifted her heavy eyes by an effort.

"Does Helen Mallory live here?"

"Helen Mallory?" repeated the woman, angrily.
"Miss Mallory lives here! Who are you, with your
'Helen Mallory?'"

"I am Estella Mallory."

The woman recoiled with a shrill cry. An instant she stood spell-bound, as it seemed, by that answer; then, seizing the girl by the arm, she drew her in.

"For the Lord's sake, come in and let me look at you!
Estella Mallory! Here, sit down—you look fit to drop!
Miss Helen! for goodness gracious' sake, come here!"

"What is it, Norah?" asked a soft voice—"what is the matter?"

"Come here, for mercy's sake, and look at this girl!
She says she's Estella Mallory, and she's asking for you.
Come quick! She looks as if she were dying."

Some one ran swiftly down-stairs, and Estella saw a lady in a gray silk dress, with pale face, and large, dark eyes, bending above her.

She drew her little book, her chain and cross from her bosom, and held them out.

"They were my mother's, and you are my mother's sister. I am very tired and ill, and—"

She said no more. The floor heaved—the wall spun. She put out her hands, blindly, to save herself, and Norah caught her as she fell.

* * * * *

"How does she seem now, Norah?"

"Better, miss, I think. She's had a nice, long sleep, and I am going to give her her beef-tea."

Estella, waking from a long, heavy sleep, as it seemed, heard these words dimly. Some one raised her head—some one held a cup of something to her dry lips.

She drank, opening her eyes drowsily for a moment, then sunk back among the pillows with a delicious sense of rest.

"Poor child!" said the first speaker, compassionately; "how deathly white—how awfully thin she is! And yet, Norah, it is her mother's face over again. No one could mistake Estella's child."

The sick girl heard no more. The deep sleep of convalescence came over her and lulled her to blessed rest.

When she awoke, the noon-day sun was streaming in dazzling chinks through the closed blinds. She lay very still, and gazed dreamily around her. It was a large, cool, pleasant chamber, prettily furnished—half bedroom, half sitting-room—and the low white bed whereon she lay was the softest and most luxurious she had ever reposed on.

The woman Norah sat in a rocking-chair, busily knitting, and a big gray cat nestled comfortably at her feet. It was such a pleasant picture of rest and peace that the tired little wanderer could have lain and looked forever.

Slowly, very slowly, memory began to drift back. Where was she? what room was this? who was that woman?

She lay and thought, still and motionless. It all came back, little by little—Peter Fisher—Roysten Darrell—the runaway marriage—that awful night in the attic—the illness—Carlotta—the poisoned draught—the flight—the journey. And this was Helen Mallory's, no doubt, and her dead mother's sister had taken the lost waif to her heart and home.

And Roysten Darrell—was he dead? and did Helen Mallory know? Would Mr. Fisher guess whither she had gone, and write the terrible story? Would they come in search of her here, and drag her forth to stand her trial for murder?

She turned her face to the wall, trembling from head to foot with unutterable dread. Oh, what would become of her, if Roysten Darrell was dead?

The chamber-door opened softly—there was the gentle rustle of a woman's dress; some one crossed the room lightly, and bent above her. She lay quite still—never moving, never opening her eyes.

"How is she, Norah?" a low voice asked. "She is not awake?"

"No, miss; she sleeps as sound and peaceful as a baby,

poor lamb! She'll wake up, clear and reasonable to-day, the doctor thinks. Poor little soul! what she must have come through!"

"Norah," said the soft voice, "come here and look at her. Look at that childish, innocent face, and tell me if she looks like a married woman?"

"A married *what?*?" cried Norah, in shrill horror. "That child married! Miss Helen, *what* do you mean?"

"Or a would-be murderer?" continued the soft voice, in tones of suppressed excitement—"a wife who has tried to poison her husband? Tell me—does she look like that?"

"Miss Helen, for the dear Lord's sake, what *do* you mean?"

"That old man—that bad, vindictive old man—accuses her of being both. Norah, this morning's post has brought an answer to my letter."

"From Mr. Peter Fisher?" breathlessly.

"From Peter Fisher—yes! A letter that is a tissue of lies from beginning to end. This child has suffered as few girls of her age have ever suffered, I am convinced. Listen, Norah, I will read it to you. But are you sure she sleeps?"

"Sure and certain, Miss Helen. She has never opened her eyes since her morning draught. She won't hear you—never fear."

Helen Mallory drew a letter from her pocket, and began to read aloud.

Low as the sweet voice was, the sick girl heard every word.

"'ROCKLEDGE, August 4, 18—.

"'MISS HELEN MALLORY,—Madame, your favor of the 20th of July has duly come to hand. Its receipt and contents did not surprise me. I expected it. I knew, when that miserable girl fled from the home which has sheltered her for over sixteen years, she would fly to you.

"'And now permit me to rectify one or two little mistakes in your letter. You speak of your niece, Estella Mallory. There is no such person. The runaway you are sheltering is Mrs. Roysten Darrell, who has wickedly fled from her home and her husband. If *that* were her only crime, one might try to forgive it, but she is also—I tell it with grief and horror—an attempted murderer! Before she fled from Fisher's Folly, she tried to take her hus-

band's life—she tried to poison him. That she did not succeed, no thanks is due to her—she administered an overdose. Captain Roysten Darrell has recovered, and has quitted Rockledge. He is a seafaring man, and a husband worthy a better wife. There was no time for him to pursue and recapture his fugitive bride, but he will be back here in three or four months at the furtherst, fully prepared to press his rightful claim. Let your niece, Estella Darrell, deny these facts, if she can. If you, Miss Helen Mallory, choose to shelter a runaway wife, you can do so, and abide the consequences when her husband returns. If she will come back to my protection, all will be forgiven, and Captain Darrell, who is infatuatedly fond of her, will thankfully overlook the past, and take her back. I remain, madame, yours to command.

“ PETER FISHER.” ”

Miss Mallory paused, very pale, and looked at her old servant.

“ I have finished,” she said. “ What do you think of this terrible letter, Norah?”

“ What you thought five minutes ago,” burst out Norah, indignantly—“ that it is lies from beginning to end! That girl a wife! that girl a poisoner! The wicked old slanderer! I wish I had Peter Fisher here, and my ten fingernails sunk in his face!”

“ Hush!” said her mistress, starting up. “ You have awakened her!”

She hurried to the bed; she had heard a stifled sob.

Estella lay, her face hidden in her hands, crying as she had never cried before in her life.

“ Oh, my dear! my dear!” exclaimed Miss Mallory, in deepest distress, “ I never meant you to hear. I thought you were asleep. My child, my child, don't weep so! We don't believe one word of this bad, cruel, lying letter.”

The girl looked up, her sobs ceasing suddenly, and the sad brown eyes gazed full into the face bending above her. What a kind face it was—so full, so patient, so sweet!

“ And yet it is true,” she said, slowly.

They were the first words she had spoken.

Helen Mallory recoiled in alarm.

“ True!”

“ In the letter, not in the spirit. I *may* be married to

Roysten Darrell for what I know. I may have almost poisoned him. I only know I never meant it."

Miss Mallory stood gazing upon her, shocked, bewildered.

"Married without knowing it! Guilty of poisoning without meaning it! My child, I don't understand you at all."

"No," said Estella, mournfully. "How should you? I hardly understand it myself. Dear lady, sit down beside me, and let me tell you all. I would have told you the day I came if I had been able. But I was ill, was I not?"

"Very ill, my poor child—like to die. But that is all past now."

"Ah! better for me perhaps if I had. How long is it ago?"

"Over two weeks. You have had a fever, and been delirious nearly all the time. You are very weak still, and must not talk too much."

"Dear lady, it will not hurt me. I will never be at rest again until you know all my sad, miserable story. I am a very, very unfortunate girl. As you said a little while ago, I have suffered as few girls of my age ever suffered before. Mr. Fisher has been so merciless to me that I don't think I can ever forgive him."

"I never knew him when he was anything else," said Helen Mallory. "I only wonder—miser that he is—he has burdened himself with you so long. I wrote to him repeatedly to send you to me; but, out of pure contrariness, I suppose, he always refused. And he forced you into marrying this Captain Roysten Darrell? But, oh, my child, my baby! are you really, really married?"

"No!" said Estella, with sudden energy—"not in the sight of God. I am no man's wife, although I have stood up and gone through the marriage ceremony. I abhor Roysten Darrell from the bottom of my heart. He is a pirate—a lawless outcast—a murderer! I would die ten thousand deaths rather than be his wife for an hour!"

And then Estella, slowly and brokenly—for she was pitifully weak—told the story of her strange midnight marriage, of her terrible mistake.

"I thought it was Dick Derwent. Poor Dick! I liked him; he was always good to me; he was my only friend. I would have married him to escape these two cruel men, and he would have done his best to make me happy, I

know. But Roysten Darrell overheard, and had him abducted by his lawless, outcast, smuggler crew, and came in his place, and took me away. I don't know who performed that mockery of marriage, but surely no minister of the church would be guilty of so heinous a crime."

"Did you love this Dick Derwent?" Helen Mallory asked.

"Love Dick? Oh, no! But he was very fond of me, and very good to me, and I would have done anything almost in my desperation to escape Roysten Darrell. Poor Dick! Who knows what those bad, cruel men have made him suffer?"

"And then," said Helen, vividly interested, "what happened when you found out your terrible mistake?"

The sick girl shivered from head to foot as she recalled that horrible night. Brokenly she told her listeners the story of her passionate refusal of Captain Darrell's claim—of the dreadful hours of that stormy night spent in the attic among the rats.

"Pitiful Heaven!" Helen Mallory said, deathly pale. "To think that any human being could torture a helpless child in that manner! The merciless, horrible old man! And then?"

Estella related the last recollection she had—of falling senseless to the floor; of her waking to find Carlotta, her nurse.

She told the pathetic story of that weary coming back to life, hopeless, in despair—of her compact with Peter Fisher.

"I meant to kill myself when I made it," she said. "It seemed easy to die. What had I to live for? And I thought it only right to give my miserable life to save Dick. I promised to marry Roysten Darrell in the presence of witnesses if they would liberate poor Richard, and they agreed. But from the moment I made the promise I meant to end my life. Ah! it was wicked and dreadful, I know, but I think I was half mad with misery and despair.

I mixed the poison with the wine, and Roysten Darrell came into the room and drank it when I was gone. I never meant it; I wanted to harm no one. I would far rather have died. I fled from the house, in the first confusion, and how I ever got here I don't know. I think I was ill and delirious half the time."

"The good God guided you," Helen Mallory said, reverentially. "My poor child—my poor, little, persecuted niece! Will such men as these ever find forgiveness, here or hereafter? But I know the reason of this compulsory marriage. I know why Peter Fisher tried to force you into becoming the wife of his unprincipled friend in such mad haste."

Estella looked at her in wonder.

"You know?" she said. "Why, it has been my greatest wonder all through. I can't understand it at all. Roysten Darrell never cared for me, never took the slightest notice of me before; and as for Mr. Fisher, I am certain he never used to consider me in any way at all. What was the reason?"

"The sudden discovery of your parentage. Yes, my child, you are no longer the poor, dependent waif, nameless and fatherless, an outcast in a cruel world, but the acknowledged daughter of a rich and distinguished nobleman. It sounds incredible, does it not—wildly and romantically improbable? But it is true."

Estella lay and stared at her in silent wonder.

"I wrote to Peter Fisher," Helen Mallory went on, "early in May of my discovery, telling him to break the news to you, giving him your father's address, and the promise of a large reward, in that father's name, as soon as he would yield you up. I know now I was a fool and a spiteful enemy not to take your father straight to Fisher's Folly, to assert his right and claim you on the spot. But I had little love for him—little reason to do him a good turn—and how was I to know you would suffer for my folly and vindictiveness? And Peter Fisher never showed you that letter?"

"Never," said Estella, in breathless wonder. "I never heard a word of all this. And I have really a father alive in the world?"

"Very much alive, my dear," said Miss Mallory. "Meaning to keep so, I fancy, for an indefinite time. Not only a father, but a rich, and titled, and most aristocratic father. No less a personage than Count Gaston Amadie de Montreuil!"

Her listener gave a little gasp, then lay perfectly still, listening with all her might.

"I had better tell you the whole story," said Helen,

slowly—"the story of your mother's wrongs and sufferings. Norah, it is an old tale to you. You had best go and see after dinner. Our little patient will be hungry, I dare say, by the time I have done."

Norah rose and left the room.

Helen looked at her niece with a sad smile.

"She has been with us from my childhood—this faithful Norah—until now. She is more an old friend than a servant. She knows all I am going to tell you—your poor mother's mournful story. More than *you* know—is it not, my dear?"

"Except that I was born at Fisher's Folly, that she died there, and was buried in Rockledge Cemetery, and that her name was the same as mine (Estella Mallory), I know nothing."

"Her maiden name, my child; she had a right to a far prouder one, as you have, also, Estella de Montreuil. But we did not know it; she was faithful unto death, and kept her heartless husband's secret to the bitter end. For he *was* heartless, dear child, though your father—as cruel and cold-blooded an aristocrat as ever broke a loving heart. I suppose it is romantic and sentimental in an old maid like me to believe in that standard delusion of poets and novelists—broken hearts; but if ever human heart broke with sorrow and lost love, hers did. My poor, tender, faithful little sister!"

The steady voice broke down—she turned away her face. Great tears rose in Estella's brown eyes, as she gently took one of Helen's slender hands.

"Go on," she said, softly.

"Let me begin at the beginning," Miss Mallory said, after a pause; "when he came to us first—an exile—an impoverished foreigner, under a false name, as a teacher of his native language. Monsieur Raoul he called himself—a handsome fellow enough, though I never liked his looks or his manners, faultless as were both. He was like a hero of romance, dear—I suppose you read romances?—tall, and dark, and distinguished, and melancholy-looking, with great, pathetic, black eyes, a sallow face, and waving masses of jet-black hair. Yes, he was very handsome, and very elegant, and very accomplished. He could talk in that deep, musical voice of his for hours, and hold us all spell-bound with tales of fair foreign lands—of his own

beautiful Paris; he could sing, he could play, he could waltz, as only Frenchmen can. He could do everything, in fact, that was fascinating, and shallow, and irresistible, and the short of the matter was that poor Stella fell madly in love with him before she had known him a month."

"So should I," said Estella, with kindling eyes. "I only wonder *you* did not, Aunt Helen."

"That is right, my dear—call me Aunt Helen. No, I did not fall in love with him. I did not even like him, and besides I was hardly twenty then, and very much in love with somebody else. But my sister Stella loved him enough for both; she was blind, and mad, and utterly infatuated; the sun rose when he came and sunk when he went, and Monsieur Raoul bounded the whole scheme of the universe to her. Before the end of the second month all was over; she fled from home, from kindred, giving up all the world for him. We never saw her again. Peter Fisher's letter, telling us she was dead and buried, a year and a half after, was the first tidings of my lost sister we received. My child, if I were to talk for a century, I could never tell you how bitter the blow of that disgraceful flight was. We thought it disgraceful then—I know now that a week before ever she left her home she was his wedded wife. I know it now from his own lips—told in sorrow and remorse when too late; but he had bound her by a solemn promise to keep his secret until he gave her leave to reveal it, and she obeyed him well. She died and made no sign that she was a wedded wife, shamefully deserted, and that her child had a right to bear one of the oldest and most patrician names in France. For he deserted her, Estella—cruelly, coldly deserted her—when the news came that the star of the French Empire had once more arisen, that Louis Napoleon had ascended the throne, and that the name of De Montreuil was to shine once more in all its old luster.

"The news came to him in New York, where he and his wife were starving together, and he left her alone and friendless, penniless and ill, and went back to France, burning with ambition.

"What was the pale, sickly girl he had married and lured away from her home, that she should stand between him and the glory that was to be his under the Napoleonic dynasty? He left her to live or die as she chose, and it

was mercifully death. She would not return to the home she had left, since the secret of her marriage was to be kept a secret still, and by the strangest of all strange elections she chose to go to old Peter Fisher. She had known him when a child—he was remotely connected with our mother's family; she knew his address, and, sick and starving, she sought the shelter of his wretched home—to die!

"He took her in—you were born, and three months after he laid her beneath the clay. Then, and not till then, he wrote to us the ending of that bright young life! There was no one to receive the news but me—a miserable, lonely girl—our father and mother had followed one another to the grave, broken down, disgraced, heart-sick with sorrow and shame. My sister Stella was dead, and had left her baby daughter with him, and he meant to rear her and bring her up to be a daughter to him in his old age. How well he kept that promise we know, don't we, Estella?"

"I have had a lonely life and a hard life," the sick girl said; "but he never turned out a merciless tyrant until of late. Go on."

"I answered his letter—a few sharp, bitter lines. My heart was very sore—my life was blighted—I had given up my betrothed husband when our disgrace came—proudly and passionately I had refused him. I would disgrace no name, I said—cast dishonor upon no honorable name.

"So George Bartram left me and wedded another bride, and I had little reason to care whether my dead sister's nameless child lived or died. I settled down to dreary old-maidenhood, with rancorous bitterness in my heart for Monsieur Raoul, hating the whole French nation for his sake, and with my faithful Norah, dragging out my lonely, loveless, imperfect life.

"But as years went on I softened. My sister's memory grew less bitter. I felt a desperate longing for something to love. I yearned to look upon the face of her child. I wrote to Peter Fisher then, asking him to send you to me, but he persistently refused. At last I gave it up. I ceased writing to him altogether until your father came and changed all:

"It was one day, late last April—a dreary, wet day—as I sat here alone, that the door-bell rang, and Norah answered it. An instant later I heard her wild scream. I

started up, hurried down-stairs, and found myself, after over seventeen years, face to face with Monsieur Raoul!

"I knew him instantly, and he knew me. Time had changed him but little. Handsome as ever, elegant as ever, self-possessed as ever, he looked me full in the face, held out his hand and spoke my name. For me, I turned sick as death. My dead sister rose up out of her grave, a reproachful ghost; and I think if I had had strength, I would have struck him in the face with my open hand. But I leaned speechless against the wall—sick and trembling from head to foot.

"'Then you don't know,' were the first distinct words I heard him utter—'she never told? Helen Mallory, I come to you for news of my wife!'

"'Your wife!' I gasped. "Your wife—was my sister Estella—'

"'My wedded wife—yes, before ever she left her father's house to follow my fortunes. Where is she now? I come to claim her at last!'

"I looked at him, growing cold and calm all at once.

"'You come rather late in the day, Monsieur Raoul,' I said. "Death—a more faithful bridegroom than you—claimed her sixteen years ago. You will find a handful of bones and ashes in Rockledge Cemetery, if you choose to go there and seek. But she was your wife—thank God for that! Though you have murdered her—thank God for that!"'

"He turned ghastly white. Estella, full as my heart was of horror and hatred of that man, I almost pitied him then.

"'Dead!' he said. "Dead! I feared it. I knew it! Oh, Estella, my wife, my wife!"

"'You murdered her,' I repeated, steadily, "as much as though you had plunged a knife in her heart—only hers was a more lingering death. But she kept your secret well—she was faithful to the end. I never knew she had the honor of being your wife, Monsieur Raoul, until this moment.'

"'Spare me,' he said, in a broken voice. "If I could give my life to recall her, I would. I loved her, Helen Mallory, better than I ever loved earthly creature; but my accursed pride and ambition were still stronger than my love. And yet I never meant to desert her. I left her, I

know, in poverty and loneliness, and went back to France; but, my fortunes retrieved, I wrote to her at once. I never received an answer. I wrote again and again, but always with a like result. I could not return and seek for her, and so I—I gave her up. I took it for granted she had returned to her home, had told all, was safely sheltered here, and too indignant at my long silence to reply when I did write. Heaven help me! and all the time my poor darling was dead.'

"'Yes,' I said, 'your remorse and repentance, Monsieur Raoul, come sixteen years too late. Let your pride and your ambition console you now if they can. Or, perhaps, monsieur has wedded a fairer and wealthier bride—one he need never desert or be ashamed of? Surely all these years he has not been faithful to the memory of the poor, little, love-struck girl, who gave up all the world for sake of his handsome face, and whose heart he broke?'

"He looked at me, deathly pale, with eyes of unutterable reproach.

"'You are merciless,' he responded, 'but I deserve it. Yes, Miss Mallory, I have been faithful. No other love has ever supplanted your sister. Will you tell me how she died? Will you try to forgive, as you hope to be forgiven, or must I leave you to find out for myself?'

"'I will tell you nothing,' I answered, passionately. 'I wonder you dare ask it. She is dead, and at rest—let that suffice. But her daughter lives, monsieur—her child and yours—render justice to *her*, if you like. Justice to the dead is beyond even your reach.'

"And then, Estella, I told him of you—only keeping the place of your residence a secret. Peter Fisher's wishes, and your wishes, should be consulted first, I thought. What claim had this Frenchman upon the daughter he had never seen?

"He listened in breathless, eager interest, his face glowing, his eyes kindling.

"'Let me go to her!' he cried. 'Tell me where I may find my Stella's child. Everything her heart can desire shall be hers; for listen, Helen Mallory—he whom you call Monsieur Raoul is Count Gaston De Montreuil, one of the richest and most powerful noblemen in the French realm. Let me find my child, and atone through her to her dead mother.'

" But I refused—coldly, resolutely refused.

" 'I will write to her guardian,' I said, frigidly, 'to the protector in whose care her dying mother left her. If he chooses to resign her—well; if not, I will never tell you, Count Gaston De Montreuil. What claim have you upon her? Come back to me, in a fortnight—you shall have her guardian's answer then.'

" He pleaded, he begged, all in vain. I was inexorable. I turned my back upon him, and left him standing in the hall, my heart harder and more bitter to him than ever. I went up to my room, and wrote that letter to Peter Fisher—that letter you never saw, and which he never answered.

" I suppose Count de Montreuil was too proud to plead further, but at the end of the fortnight he came again. No reply had been returned to my letter, and I took Peter Fisher's silence for refusal of my proposal. I told him so, and he looked bitterly disappointed.

" 'And I am obliged to return to France in three days,' he said. 'The diplomatic business which has brought me to this country is satisfactorily concluded. I *must* return, and there is no time left to search for my child. But, Helen Mallory, you are a more pitiless enemy than ever I thought it possible for you to be.'

" 'I am what you and your doings have made me,' I answered. 'I would not swerve an inch out of my way to do you a good turn, Monsieur le Comte. I have done for you all I will do, unless your daughter's guardian relents—in that case I will write, if you choose to leave me your address. I have the honor, Count De Montreuil, to wish you good-day.'

" And so we parted—he to return to France, I to resume my lonely life. But he left me his address, in case I should ever have occasion to write to him of you.

" And now, Estella, you know all. Your father is a rich and powerful nobleman. As his daughter, all the splendor of this world may be yours. You may shine in brilliant foreign courts; you will be fêted, and flattered, and caressed; you will be Mademoiselle de Montreuil, sole heiress of a princely fortune.

" You have but to say the word, and I will write. But remember, Estella," and Helen Mallory's dark eyes glowed with the deep vindictiveness of long years, "he broke your

mother's heart, he blighted her life—he loved the power and glory of wealth and ambition a thousand times better than he ever loved you or her. He left her to die, cruelly, heartlessly—no after remorse can alter that fact. In going to your father, you go straight to the murderer of your mother."

"I will never go!" exclaimed Estella, passionately. "I would die first! What do I care for his wealth or his title? Let him keep both, and bestow them upon whom he likes, since they were the price of my mother's life. I will never go to him, never acknowledge Count De Montreuil as my father!"

"Think well," said Helen, "there may be no after-choice. Take time, and think of all you give up."

"There is no need. If I thought for a year long, my resolution would be the same. I never knew him; I don't want to know him now—a father who would be ashamed, beside, of the little, awkward, ignorant country girl. Let him go, let us forget him; I never wish to hear his name more. But *you*, Aunt Helen—you will give poor Essie a little corner of your heart and home?"

She held out her arms. Helen Mallory folded her close to her breast, with almost a mother's passion.

"Forever, my darling! And, when Aunt Helen dies—and she will not be a long liver—dear child, all she has will be yours. It is no princely fortune I can offer, but still a fortune with which all the pleasures and gayeties of this life may be yours. Only love me, Estella—for I am a lonely, loveless woman—and promise never to leave me while I live."

"I promise!" Estella said, solemnly.

And then silence fell between them, and both were lost in sad thought.

There was a little pang of remorse at Helen Mallory's heart for what she had done, but she resolutely refused to harken to its sting.

"I have done right," she said, obstinately, to herself. "What claim has this bad, ambitious Frenchman to my dead sister's child? As she says herself, he would be ashamed of her. He was ashamed to acknowledge my sister as his wife, and this poor child is still more unformed and under-bred. Let the haughty Frenchman go—she

chooses to stay with me. I will provide for her—make her happy—and leave her all when I die."

Make her happy? Ah, human blindness! If Helen Mallory could have foreseen the future—have lifted one corner of that mystic curtain which hides our destiny—how she would have shrunk in horror from the future she was planning for her niece! But that tragic future was hidden, and Estella went on blindfolded to her Fate.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CONQUERING HERO.

ESTELLA MALLORY recovered rapidly. Youth, and hope, and a strong constitution speedily triumphed over the weary illness that had held her a prisoner for weeks. And they were so kind to her—Aunt Helen and the faithful Norah. No mother, over her first-born, could be more devoted than Helen Mallory to this beloved niece. By night and by day she hovered about her, never tired of ministering to her invalid wants, of coaxing that sick appetite, of reading aloud, of conversing. All Estella's former life, as far back as she could remember, was hers, and, in return, Aunt Helen told her of the one romance of her own lonely existence—that little love story, blighted forever by her only sister's supposed disgrace.

"Perhaps I was wrong," Helen said, with a sigh, "for I loved him dearly, and he loved me, and no act of any third person should have come between us. But I was proud and bitter, and I gave him up, and made both our lives desolate. For, though George Bartram married another, he never loved his wife as he loved me. I knew it from his own dying lips. And I—ah, Essie! the dreary, weary, lonely years I have dragged through—my heart empty and cold and heavy as stone! I never look upon his brother's face but that the old pang of parting comes back, bitterer than death!"

"His brother?"

"Yes, my dear—Alwyn Bartram, his only brother, many years younger than poor George, and his living image. He comes here to see me sometimes. He knows our story, Essie, and his presence seems like a link between the living and the dead. For George left no children, and his

wife is married again, and Alwyn is the last of the Bartrams. You ought to see him, Essie, my little hero-worshiper. He is handsome as a demi-god, and an author, and an artist, and everything that is delightful. If I could see my little girl Mrs. Alwyn Bartram, I think I would cease to regret all the lost years of my life."

Estella laughed and blushed, but her face darkened also.

"You forget, Aunt Helen," she said; "I can never marry. Captain Darrell may come here and claim me."

"Let him try it!" impetuously cried Helen. "Let him dare to try it! No no! he and Peter Fisher know better than that. 'The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft aglee,' and theirs have gone in this case. Set your heart at rest, Estella. You might marry to-morrow, for all *they* dare interfere. Captain Darrell has no more claim upon you than he has upon me."

"You think so, Aunt Helen? You really think so?"

"I know so, my dear. In the first place, I do not believe any clergyman was ever base enough to perform that ceremony. In the second, even if a clergyman did, such a marriage would be null and illegal, and lay both him and all concerned open to prosecution. Forget all about it, Estella. It is only an unpleasant episode of the past that can never harm you in the future. You are as free as the wind that blows, and may marry my favorite, Alwyn, to-morrow, and snap your fingers at Roysten Darrell."

But Estella was in no hurry to marry. She had enough of *that* for one while. It was very pleasant to know that she was free and safe; and convalescence went on so rapidly that in another week she was able to move about and spend the bright summer days in her arm-chair by the window.

Very pretty looked the pale invalid in her delicate white wrapper, lighted up with rosy ribbons, her bright brown hair freshly curled and perfumed, and the tint of a blush-rose dawning in the thin cheeks.

"Alwyn ought to see you now," Helen Mallory said, her dark eyes full of love and pride. "You might sit for one of the Madonnas he likes so much to paint, with that sweet moonlight face of yours, so spiritual and so lovely. Perhaps I ought not to tell you, my pet; but you know

you are pretty, I dare say, and Alwyn, with his artist's eyes, will go wild over you when he comes."

And Estella laughed, and blushed beautifully, and was pleased beyond everything, and took a prolonged survey of herself in the mirror when injudicious Aunt Helen went out.

"*Am I pretty?*" she wondered. "I never thought about my looks before, and I always was ugly in the horrid, dingy, shabby things I wore at Fisher's Folly. Dick liked me; but then—poor Dick—there weren't many beauties among the sunburned girls of Rockledge. I should like to be pretty—I should dearly like it; and I hope—I hope this handsome artist *may* admire me when he comes! Alwyn Bartram! such a dear, romantic name! And then, oh, to think of his being a poet, and an artist besides, and to know a poet and an artist has been the dream of my life!"

And so, thanks to Aunt Helen and her foolish match-making, Estella's silly little head began to be filled to overflowing with vain conceits and dreams of this dark, unknown hero.

She had read a little book, all blue and gold, "*Summer Dreams*," by An Idler, and she knew the "*Idler*" to be Mr. Alwyn Bartram, and to her the pretty, tender jingle of his love songs was the sweetest music on earth. It was an unconscious mixture of Alfred de Musset and Alfred Tennyson, and it had been a failure in the literary world, as all early volumes of poems seem destined to be; but to Helen Mallory and her niece it was as the music of the spheres, with every line worthy to be written in letters of gold. She had read his only novel, "*The Lady Claribel*," another literary failure—a tender, dreamy, misty, love-idyl; she had seen a portfolio of his drawings and water-color sketches, and all, all had been perfection. She had gazed on his portrait, painted by himself—a handsome, dark-eyed fellow, with a high forehead, and a beautiful, sensitive mouth, and her heart had thrilled—that silly, romantic heart!—and had almost stopped beating at the delirious thought that one day she was destined to see, to speak to this wonderful being in broadcloth.

The last of August found Estella quite well, and able to race up and down-stairs, and to explore her future home. A very nice house—full of large, airy, pretty apartments,

with an elegant drawing-room, where a grand piano held solitary state, and Mr. Alwyn Bartram's portrait smiled serenely down from the papered walls. A beautiful room to unsophisticated Estella, with its velvet carpet, its amber-stained curtains, its carved and gilded chairs, its grand gaselier, its pictures and flowers and splendidly bound books. Aunt Helen laughed at the little country girl's raptures.

"Foolish child! it is only a very commonplace apartment, after all. Wait until you go into society—wait until you 'come out,' and go to parties over in the city, and then you will see. My poor little drawing-room will look contracted and shabby enough in comparison with the untold glories of Beacon Street. I seldom enter it myself, except now and then for an hour's practice. You can't play, of course; well, I shall teach you."

And then Aunt Helen opened the piano, and sat down and played a few waltzes and marches, and threw her niece into a second ecstasy of delight.

"Will I ever be able to play like that, Aunt Helen? Oh, how beautiful it is, and how happy you ought to be!"

"Ought I? Yes, I suppose so—if I were not the most ungrateful, discontented wretch alive. But I am happy now, since I have got my darling Essie, and I mean to be happier, teaching her all I know—which isn't much. And," pinching the bright cheeks, "happiest of all, when Alwyn Bartram comes and falls headlong in love with her."

Estella listened complacently. She heard such speeches as this so often that it was growing to seem quite a settled thing that her unknown hero should fall in love with her at first sight, and make her his wife out of hand. Miss Mallory had written to New York, where this demi-god resided, to invite him to Chelsea, and the demi-god had returned a few dashing lines, in a big, masculine fist, accepting the invitation for the middle of September.

There had been a second letter also from Mr. Peter Fisher, demanding an account of his runaway ward, "Mrs. Roysten Darrell." And Helen had sent him such an answer, in the indignation of the moment, as had effectually stopped all further communication. She had exposed all his villainy—threatened both him and Roysten Darrell with instant prosecution if they dared molest her niece—informed

him of that niece's decision to live with her, and not to return to her father, and ended by the announcement that Estella was neither his ward nor Roysten Darrell's wife, and that all his plotting and cruelty had failed. Peter Fisher was effectually silenced at once and forever.

Estella's new life now fairly began. Helen constituted herself her teacher, and gave her lessons in music, in French and drawing, and from the first the girl made rapid progress. Ah, how bright those September days were—passed in delightful study, with the most indulgent of teachers—or in delightful reading of novels and romances, in driving, walking, shopping and visiting! She grew so brightly pretty that you would never have known her for the same little pale-faced, sallow girl, and sometimes gazing in the mirror at her own radiant face, Estella wondered if “I be I.”

The crowning glory of her life was very near—her day of fate was close at hand. Coming home one evening from a long walk, she found Aunt Helen waiting dinner, and reading the “Evening Herald.” She threw down the paper at sight of her niece and took her place at the table.

“Booth plays ‘Hamlet’ to-night at the Boston, Essie,” she said. “Wouldn’t you like to go and see him? You were saying the other day you had never been inside a theater in your life.”

“I should like it of all things, auntie. But you—you never go to such places.”

“Then I will begin for your sake, my dear,” Miss Mallery said, brightly. “I have played recluse long enough. We will engage a box and go to-morrow night.”

Estella was charmed—theaters, operas, and all that, were like the fabled glories of the Arabian Nights to her—something to dream of and wonder over. And now she was to behold their splendors and enchantments with her own eyes. She passed that night and all next day in a fever of expectation, and when the hour came to dress, took more pains with her toilet than she had ever taken before in her life.

“Will I do, Aunt Helen?” she asked, with sparkling eyes.

Aunt Helen’s own eyes lighted up almost as brightly as the girl’s as she surveyed her.

"Little Conceit! look in the glass! You know quite as well as I do how pretty you are. Ah! why won't Alwyn hurry, and be dazzled by my brown-eyed darling?"

Estella laughed and shook out her summery robes. Yes, she *was* looking pretty—very, very pretty in her blue silk dress, her white opera-cloak, and coquettish little white hat and blue plume. Very pretty, with all her gold-brown ringlets falling in shining shower to her waist—her eyes full of golden light, her cheeks like June roses. And the little witch knew it, and smiled brightly back at her own image.

"I am glad your little countrified niece won't disgrace you, Aunt Helen. And you—but then you always look stately and elegant, my handsome auntie, so where is the use of telling you you are both now? Ah, what a change a few weeks have made in my life! If any one had told me three months ago when I was moped to death at Fisher's Folly, like Mariana in her 'Moated Grange,' that to-night I would be going to the Boston Theater to see Edwin Booth—robed in silk and lace—I would no more have believed it than I could have believed in the fabulous tale of Cinderella."

"Very likely, my dear, and *this* is but the beginning. Wait until you make your *début*, and it is the theater, the opera, and two or three parties each night, over and over again. I foresee that my little girl is going to be the belle of the season."

They were rattling along in the carriage over the tortuous streets of Boston, and Estella was gazing delightedly out of the window. To her the brilliantly lighted stores, the crowded sidewalks, the bustle and life, were a never-ceasing delight.

"It is like a tale of enchantment," she said, dreamily; "I can't quite realize it. Sometimes I grow almost afraid—such happiness can not last."

Miss Mallory smiled indulgently. The carriage stopped—a moment later, they were being shown to their box by the obsequious usher. Of course, the theater was crowded—was not Booth playing?—and the orchestra was crashing out some grand but deafening overture as they took their places. The lights, the music, the vast throng! The little country girl caught her breath with one ecstatic gasp, and sunk into her seat and gazed around her like one in some

rapturous trance. Helen Mallory looked in her dazzled face, and laughed outright.

" You little, rustic goose! You little, excitable enthusiast! I never saw such an entranced countenance in my life! What is it? This big building—the gas-blaze—the people—the music—*what?*"

" Everything! All together! Oh, Aunt Helen, it is like fairy-land!"

" Indeed! But I never was in fairy-land. How delightful it must be to be young, and fresh, and able to go into raptures only at sight of a theater! Ah! there's the bell; now use your ears as well as your eyes, for Edwin Booth is worth listening to."

The play began. Estella leaned forward, rapt breathless, drinking in every word. It was all familiar—had she not spent the day reading "Hamlet?"—but to see it played—that was different. She hardly moved—she hardly seemed to breathe until the curtain fell upon the first act. More than one glass in the crowded house turned admiringly upon the pretty, rapturous, youthful face; but Estella never saw them.

Among them was that of a tall, dark gentleman, who had lounged in with a party of friends, and who was paying more attention to the people about him than to the business of the stage.

" Look, Bartram," said one of his companions—" look at that face in the proscenium box opposite—the girl with the white opera-cloak and jockey-hat. If you ever feel inclined to paint 'Enthusiasm' there is your model ready to your hand."

" A pretty face, too," said a second. " Bartram might paint her for the goddess Hebe, so bright and roseate she is. It does one good in this age of chalky pallor to see such celestial bloom as that."

The gentleman addressed leveled his glass, and took a long stare at the pretty, rosy face. Then, quite as carelessly, he glanced at Hebe's companion, and dropped his lorgnette with a sharp exclamation.

" By Jove!" he said, " who'd have thought it?"

" What!" exclaimed the first speaker, " you don't know them, do you? You've luck always, Bartram—the luck of a good-looking artist. Who are they? What's the earthly name of our golden-eyed divinity?"

"I don't know your golden-eyed divinity, Lawlor, but the handsome, uplifted-looking lady beside her is Miss Helen Mallory, of Chelsea, one of my dearest and oldest friends. I must pay my respects at once. *Allons, messieurs.*"

"And you don't know the 'Girl with the golden eyes?'" Lawlor said, in a disappointed tone.

"Never saw her before, but I more than suspect that she is the elder lady's niece. Shall I plead your cause, Lawlor? tell her it is the tenth case of love at first sight with you within a week? *Au revoir* until to-morrow. I go to bask in the smiles of your goddess."

Five minutes later, and the door of the box opened, and the tall, dark gentleman sauntered easily in.

"Can I really believe my eyes?" he said, holding out his hand. "Is this Miss Helen Mallory, the Recluse of Chelsea, or only an optical delusion? Please shake hands, and relieve me of doubt."

Miss Mallory turned sharply around, and barely repressed a cry of delight. Her whole face lighted up with pleasure at the sight of the dark, handsome, smiling face.

"You, Alwyn?" she cried. "Oh, what a surprise this is! The last person on earth I should have dreamed of seeing here!"

"Exactly what I have been saying to myself ever since I first set eyes on *you*."

"But I thought you were in New York?"

"Did I not say I was coming about the middle of September, and is not this the middle of September? I have but just arrived, and dropped in here with some fellows to have a look at Booth, on my way to Chelsea. Verily, you might have knocked me down with a feather when I lifted my eyes and beheld *you*."

"I came on Essie's account," Helen said, smiling. "The stage lost its charms for me long ago. Estella, my dear, let me present Mr. Alwyn Bartram, of New York. My niece, Alwyn, of whom I made mention in my letter."

"I thought as much," Mr. Bartram said. "I knew it could be no other. And, then, she resembles *you*, Miss Helen. Miss Estella, we must be very good friends, since we are both the property of 'Aunt Helen.'"

He shook hands gayly. And Estella? She knew from the first moment it was he—her hero—her demi-god in

the flesh! Was not that duskily handsome face pictured already indelibly on her sentimental little heart?

Artist, author, poet, he stood before her, beautiful with "man's best beauty"—a being for other men to envy, and women to adore. And they expected her to lift her daring eyes to this modern Byron, to dare to talk to this author of "Lady Claribel," this writer of entrancing poems?

The foolish heart of the dreamer of sixteen actually seemed to stand still with unutterable admiration and awe.

Mr. Alwyn Bartram, all unconscious of the havoc he was making in that wildly beating breast, leaned lightly over the back of her chair, and talked away animatedly to Miss Mallory. If he had not been an author and a demi-god, and handsome as an angel, Estella might have thought his rapid flow of remarks commonplace and trite enough, but being both, every word took a depth in her eyes not intrinsically its own, and were as the pearls and diamonds dropping from the lips of the girl in the fairy tale. And then, the voice that went on so fluently was the deepest, the richest, the most melodious of masculine tones, and the slender hands that lay on the crimson velvet back of Estella's chair were the white, shapely artist's hands the girl admired so much. Altogether he was perfect—better than the hero of any novel she had read.

"And Aunt Helen expects him to admire *me*—a little, awkward, silent, plain country girl like *me*!" she thought, with a sudden sense of despair. "He is too bright and beautiful and talented for a Princess Royal!"

As the thought crossed her mind, he suddenly bent over her with an electric smile that was like a flash of light. Aunt Helen had been speaking of her, and he had been listening with an amused face.

"I am so glad you like my dreary scribble, Miss Essie," he said. "I may call you Essie, may I not, since Aunt Helen gives me permission? I wish those horrible critics could have done the same, but they tore my two unfortunate little books to atoms. They deserved it, I dare say, but it was none the less excruciating at the time."

"And you authors are such a thin-skinned race," Aunt Helen said. "Still, I suppose you have got over it before this."

Mr. Bartram laughed.

"I hope so; nevertheless I shall be in no haste to launch

a third literary craft upon these troubled waters. I have given myself up to art, and left the sister profession go."

"And your uncle's business, Alwyn—what of that?"

"Stock-broking? Oh! I have given *that* the go-by altogether, and so offended the old man mortally. I haven't seen him in six months, but as he duly remits my allowance, I manage to drag on existence without the light of his countenance."

"And your pictures sell, I suppose?"

Alwyn Bartram made a wry face, then laughed once more.

"That is the worst of it! No, my pictures, like my books, *don't* sell. Either the world has lost all taste, or else I— But the other supposition is too horrible to be thought of. I shall awake some day, no doubt, and find myself famous. Meantime, with full coffers, life in New York goes agreeably enough."

"There is no danger, I trust—I am silly to think of it. Your uncle has no one else to leave his fortune to, of course."

"But he has, by Jove! and a very blue lookout it will be for me if he does it. He thinks his other nephew, Robert Bartram—'Robert the Devil,' as he used to be called—is still alive somewhere. I was his prime favorite until I refused to go into the office; now his thoughts turn to scapegrace Robert. But I shall hope on until the end comes, and trust to my old luck."

He laughed again—the cares of life evidently sat lightly on Mr. Alwyn Bartram's handsome shoulders. He talked away animatedly to Miss Mallory and her niece until the play ended, and they drove home together, for he was to be their guest while in Boston.

But Estella talked very little in return—monosyllables were all she could find in reply to this hero of her dreams.

She stood looking at herself again that night before retiring, in the silence and solitude of her own room. The rose bloom was as bright, the golden luster in the hazel eyes as brilliant as ever, but in her heart there was nothing but despair.

"I can not talk to him—I hardly dare lift my eyes to his face; I am not even pretty, with those milk-maid cheeks and red-brown hair. And he—oh, *how* handsome,

how beautiful he is! And I love him already with all my heart!"

CHAPTER XII.

MR. ALWYN BARTRAM.

MR. ALWYN BARTRAM lingered two weeks in that pleasant old house in "dull Chelsea"—two brightly blissful weeks—and turned it into Paradise. To Estella Mallory, the little girl in love for the first time in her life, those two celestial weeks stood out ever after from the story of her life as a time passed in Eden. Never shone the sun so bright, never sped golden summer days so swiftly; never was there so glorified a being in all the wide earth as this dark-eyed artist and poet, and never was there half so blessed and happy a girl as little, foolish Estella. Come what might, she *had* been blessed; no after misery—and the misery was very near—could alter that.

Mr. Bartram was one of those happily constituted people who are immediately at home wherever they go; whose smiles shed sunshine around them, who are destined to be spoiled, and petted, and caressed by the whole world. Men liked him, women fell in love with him, matrons indulged him, and young girls went wild for love of his handsome face.

He did everything, or a little of everything that society liked. He played the piano brilliantly, he sung in the richest of superb tenors, he waltzed to perfection, he painted lovely little pictures, and scribbled more lovely little poems.

And if he made love to every young lady he met, who can blame him, since those young ladies made love in their own pretty roundabout way to *him* first, showering smiles upon him and turning their backs contemptuously upon less favored mortals?

He was the "darling of the gods," with the purse of Fortunatus in prospective when that stock-broking uncle should see fit to die; a genius in the present, blessed with a light heart, an elastic conscience, a sound digestion, and the beauty of an Apollo Belvidere. Lucky Alwyn Bartram!

And Estella adored him. That is the word for it. And the pretty, youthful face grew celestial in its bright bliss and blushing happiness.

Surely Alwyn Bartram would have been stone blind could he have misunderstood those radiant eyes that told their innocent story so plainly; those roseate blushes that came and went so beautifully at his bidding.

But he was very well used to that sort of thing, and took it quite as a matter of course. He admired Helen Mallory's bright-faced niece very much, after a lazy artist sort of fashion, and looked at the glowing blushes with a cool, professional eye.

"The very model I want for my Undine," he said, critically; "the face I have been searching for everywhere and failed to find—youthful, innocent, trusting and sweet. I shall sketch that exquisite face and head of yours, Miss Essie, and immortalize you in oils when I get back to New York. I am going to be very industrious next winter—ignore the opera, give all my Bohemian friends the cut direct, turn my back upon the best metropolitan society, and take the world of art by storm. My Undine 'shall make my fortune.'"

And forthwith Mr. Bartram fell to work, and enthusiastically dashed off a sketch of blushing Essie on the spot.

"It's a thousand pities I can't carry you off with me, Essie," he said. "Such a model might inspire the veriest dauber that ever spoiled canvas. Ah! how I should work with you in my studio—my Undine's sunshiny face lighting its dingy walls! What a picture I should paint! how I should astonish those old academicians, who sneer so mercilessly at my piteous failures now! I wish I had a nice old mother to play propriety, and make you her guest. I would carry off my Undine, Miss Helen Mallory, willingly."

Helen Mallory smiled, very well pleased; this was just what she wanted. Mr. Bartram might carry off her pretty niece any day he liked, even without the "nice old mother" to play propriety in New York, and light up his studio with her loveliness, and paint "Undines" for the remainder of his mortal career. A plain gold ring and a bridal wreath would make that all right.

"You will turn Essie's head with flattery, Alwyn," she said, aloud. "So she makes a nice Undine, does she? Who is to be your traitor knight—yourself?"

"If I can find no better model. But I should never be

faithless to such an Undine," he said, gayly. "Were I Hildebrand, I would never seek a fairer bride."

"It is coming," thought Helen, glancing across at Estella's happy, glowing face; "the dream of my life will be realized at last. I will live to see my darling Alwyn Bartram's wife. And she loves him—my little dove-eyed darling—her innocent face shows it every hour of the day. I ought to tell him her story, I suppose, and yet why need I? He knows as much of her mother's history as I did before the Count Montreuil turned up. What necessity is there for his knowing more? Essie and her father will never meet. And as for her history—that painful episode of Fisher's Folly—the poor child shrinks so sensitively from all allusion to it, that I hate to betray her; and yet, if he marries her he ought to know. However, when he speaks it will be time enough to decide all that."

So Miss Mallory put off the evil time, and let events take their course.

But the glowing days of that sunny September wore on, one after another, and still the handsome artist did not "speak."

He was as delighted as ever, as irresistibly fascinating. He walked with Essie, drove with her, sung for her, gave her lessons in drawing, took her to every place of amusement open in the city, sketched her pretty face in a hundred different ways, paid her lazy, artist-like compliments; but he never "spoke."

If Helen Mallory had not been thoroughly out of practice in everything pertaining to the grand passion, she must have seen at once that his open, outspoken admiration foreboded the very worst of her pet scheme.

Mr. Alwyn Bartram, smoking his endless cheroots, and sketching Essie's charming face, would have opened his lazy, dark eyes in wide wonder, could he only have known what was passing in Miss Mallory's mind. Even Norah saw that to which he was stone blind.

"Drat the man!" exclaimed Helen Mallory's faithful tire-woman. "Where's his eyes? Can't he see that poor little girl is dead in love with his handsome face, and that Miss Helen is set on the match with all her heart? There he goes dawdling and meandering about, smoking continual, and painting of his good-for-nothing little pictures, and as blind as a bat to it all. And by and by he will

take himself off, and leave the house as desolate as a dungeon, and poor Miss Essie to pine her heart out, for all he cares. They're all alike, these men! Thank the Lord I never had anything to do with them!"

The possibility that Mr. Alwyn Bartram might be as "dead in love" with somebody else as Estella was with him never seemed to enter into the range of their thoughts.

But the fatal truth came home to the girl herself, as she sat by her idol's side one misty September twilight, the drawing-room all to themselves.

It was a hazy, overcast afternoon, with a threatening of rain in the lowering sky, and a bleak, easterly wind whistling shrilly up the deserted street. That easterly wind had driven Helen to bed with nervous headache, and kept Mr. Bartram and Estella confined to the house.

He had been reading aloud to her her pet poem, "*Locksley Hall*," charming her for the thousandth time with those deep, melodious tones. Now the book was thrown aside, and in the tender twilight dreamy silence fell between them.

"When shall I read Tennyson to you again, Essie, I wonder?" Mr. Bartram said, dreamily. "You will forget all about me, I suppose, when I am gone. And I go on Monday."

"On Monday!" Estella said, with a sort of gasp; "and this is Saturday evening!"

And then her voice suddenly failed her, and she looked at him with wild, wide eyes.

Alwyn Bartram saw that look, and his heart smote him. Her cherished secret, so closely hidden as she thought, was very large print—poor child—and easily read.

And he had not meant to make love to her, either—this innocent little girl—and yet in a thousand indirect ways he had done it from the first. He saw that sudden whitening of the fair face, that wild dilation of the wonderful brown eyes, and the sharpest pang of remorse he had ever felt pierced his careless heart.

"What a wretch I am!" he thought; "what a frivolous, heartless wretch! And this child is as innocent of the meaning of the verb 'to flirt' as the babe in its cradle. I have made her think I care for her until she has grown to care for me; I have treated her as I would have treated any hardened coquet in *Vanity Fair*, and now—"

He would not finish his mental sentence; he turned away from the sight of that pale, startled young face, from the clear gaze of those guiltless eyes.

"I must go, Essie," he said, more gravely than was his wont. "My uncle is very ill—my uncle in Richmond, Virginia—my sole living relative, the rich stock-broker, you know. I had a letter to-day from his lawyer, telling me if I would see him alive I must hasten South at once. There never was much love between us, heaven knows, but blood is thicker than water, and then"—with one of his old, somewhat heartless laughs—"he is a rich man, and I am his prospective heir. If I lose my inheritance, I will be an object of compassion indeed. So you perceive I must go."

"Yes," Estella said, slowly; "you must go. But you will come back?"

"Oh, some time—surely!" the young man said, gayly crossing over to the piano; "but I'm afraid not very soon. I have stayed longer than I intended—longer than I should have stayed, in fact—longer, I suppose, than I will ever stay again. New York is my home, Essie—I have a thousand ties to bind me there—and so, no matter how my uncle Wylder leaves his fortune, it will be a long time, I fear, before I can return to dear old Chelsea. But you must not quite forget me, you know; and when I get married—which folly I expect to commit before very long—you must come to Gotham, and make me and my wife a long visit. You will, won't you, Cousin Essie?"

Without waiting for a reply, Mr. Alwyn Bartram rattled over the keys in a brilliant prelude, and he began to sing Gumpert's little cynical song, in his most delightful voice:

"Smile again, my dearest love,
Weep not that I leave you;
I have chosen not to rove—
Bear it though it grieve you.
See the sun, and moon, and stars
Gleam the wide world over,
Whether near or whether far,
On your loving rover!

"And the sea has ebb and flow—
Wind and cloud deceive us;
Summer heat and winter's snow
Seek us but to leave us.

Thus the world grows old and new—
 Why should you be stronger?
 Long have I been true to you—
 Now I'm true no longer!

" As no longer yearns my heart,
 Or your smiles enslave me;
 Let me thank you ere we part
 For the love you gave me.
 See the May flowers wet with dew
 Ere their doom is over.
 Should I not return to you,
 Find another lover!"

And Estella! She sat still as stone, her hands crossed upon her lap, her eyes fixed on the darkening street. And this was the end of all!

" Horrible little song, isn't it?" Mr. Bartram said, rising from the piano. " You haven't answered me yet, Essie. You will make me that visit, will you not?"

" When you are married?"—how strangely her voice sounded, faint and far-off even to herself! " When are you"—it died entirely away.

" Very soon—I think—I hope. Look, Essie, I never showed you this before."

He drew from beneath his vest somewhere a locket, richly inlaid with sparkling stones, and touching the spring it flew open. He handed it to her—not looking at the white, drawn face.

" See, Essie—my darling, and my bride that is to be!"

There was a little tremor in his steady voice—the tremor of a deep, passionate love. Estella took it There was still light enough left in the darkening sky for her to see the pictured face.

Such an exquisite face! A face of perfect beauty—the face of a girl not much older than herself, perfectly painted. A darkly beautiful face—not of doubtful, unformed prettiness, like her own, but one concerning whose exquisite loveliness there could be no two opinions. You might not choose to like, but you could not fail to admire. Wonderful eyes—large, black, luminous—looked up at you; wonderful waves of rich black hair rippled over the snowy shoulders; and the low brow, a mouth like a rosebud, a nose that was simply perfect, tinted oval cheeks—that was what Estella saw. Beneath was the name "*Leonie*."

She looked a moment. In that moment the beautiful dark face was pictured on her mind, never to be forgotten. Then she closed the locket, and handed it back.

"It is beautiful! I wish you every happiness, Mr. Bartram, and—your bride."

Again her voice failed. She was so young, so utterly unschooled, and Aunt Helen had talked such terribly foolish things. The door opened, and Norah came in to light the gas.

"Miss Helen is down. She is waiting for you both in the dining-room," Norah said, briskly. "Her headache is better, and you had best not keep her waiting dinner."

"*My* head aches," said Estella, passing swiftly by her. "Ask her to excuse me. I don't want any dinner."

She was gone like a flash. Norah lighted the gas, and stared blankly after her.

"That child has caught cold. She is as hoarse as a raven. You haven't been keeping her in a draught, I hope, Mr. Alwyn Bartram?"

"No," Alwyn Bartram replied, a second sharp pang shooting through the heart that beat beneath the jeweled locket, as he turned away from the woman's sharp eyes and left the room.

And up in her own chamber, while the rainy night shut darkly down, Estella Mallory fell on her knees by the bedside, her face lying on her hands, as if she never cared to lift it again, the world locked out, doing battle with her shame and despair.

CHAPTER XIII.

LEONIE.

A CHARMING picture! a radiant vision! There was a shimmer of gold-colored silk, a gleaming of opals, a misty cloud of rare old lace, a slender, willowy figure, robed like a princess in a fairy-tale, a dark face of exquisite loveliness, a fall of rich black hair crowned with a circlet of red gold—and that was Miss Leonie De Montreuil.

A low hum of suppressed admiration ran though the crowded rooms as she appeared, floating in her golden robes and flashing opals, a perfect picture of youth and beauty.

A little group of gentlemen, hovering aloof, stopped their flow of society small-talk to stare with all their might.

"The little Parisian is in full feather to-night," one said; "radiant as one of the black-eyed houris of the Mussulman's paradise. By Jove! old Rutherford has taste!"

"No more a Parisian than you are," said a second, "in spite of her Frenchified name. She was born and bred here in New York, and never saw France until within the last three years. Then this rich uncle, or cousin or something turns unexpectedly up, wants an heir or an heiress, sends for the little Leonie, places her in a Parisian convent to be polished up, and finally brings her back here, and leaves her. Political business brought over the elegant Count De Montreuil, and took him back in a hurry. I fancy he is not over and above devoted to his fascinating little ward, since he was so willing to leave her behind."

"She wished to stay," said another; "whether for the sake of old Rutherford's countless rupees, or Alwyn Bartram's handsome face, it would be hard to say. Fools, both of them! The little belle has no more heart than a grindstone."

"She likes Bartram," remarked the first speaker, decidedly; "and, if that mythical uncle in Virginia makes him his heir, she will marry him. Where is Bartram? He should be here to see her to-night."

"He has been out of town for the past few weeks, on a visit to some friends in the wilds of Massachusetts. He returned to-day. I met him this afternoon in Broadway, and he told me he was *en route* for Richmond. The stockbroking uncle is sick—in *articulo mortis*—and Alwyn goes to take possession of his fortune."

"If he gets it," said another, with a shrug. "'There is many a slip,' and in this case there happens to be a second heir. But his case with the little De Montreuil lies in a nutshell. If he gets the inheritance, he gets her; if he doesn't, he doesn't. I shouldn't mind backing old Rutherford, ten to one, if you want to make a book, Roosevelt."

Meantime, the object of all this cold-blooded discussion sailed along to pay her respects to the hostess of the evening, serenely unconscious. She saw the admiring looks, she heard the admiring whispers, but she was so used to admiration that she took it quite as a matter of course.

Her perfect beauty and her exquisite dress made her al-

ways a sort of surprise—made her bloom and brightness ever new.

"I had almost given you up, Miss De Montreuil," her hostess said; "and Ethel has been fidgeting her life out for the past half hour lest you should fail to come. You will find her in the boudoir, waiting as impatiently as a stricken lover."

Miss De Montreuil smiled faintly. She was a very languid little beauty, as radically and unaffectedly nonchalant as a duchess; but the faint smile was wondrously beautiful, and lighted up the whole dark, exquisite face.

"Mrs. Manners and I are on our way to Clara Leesom's birthnight ball," said she, in the softest and most silvery of feminine voices. "We are very late, but I would not on any account have missed looking in upon you. How is Ethel to-day? I have been so busy, really, I have had no time to call or send."

"She is much better—strong enough to receive her most intimate friends in the boudoir, but not strong enough to appear in the rooms for general society. They told her, Leonie," with a little laugh "that you are on the eve of matrimony, and, as *somebody* is a particular favorite of hers, she is all anxiety since."

The fairy belle shrugged her pretty, plump shoulders in very French fashion indeed.

"I am on the eve of marrying Mr. Rutherford, I suppose, and somebody means Alwyn Bartram. The world takes a great deal of pains to settle my destiny. I must go and ease her anxious mind."

She moved away—a walking poem, floating in her shimmering robes. She passed down the long room, nodding and smiling right and left—a dazzling little beauty as ever turned the heads of men.

A curtain of sea-green silk hung over the pillared archway at the further extremity. She lifted this lightly, and passed at once into an inner room.

A little bijou of a room, all cool white and pale green, lighted by dim clusters of gas, in crystal cups, with frail exotics perfuming the air, and dim white statues gleaming against dusky green backgrounds.

It was like a sea nymph's grot—an ocean cave—and the pale girl, with the floating yellow hair, who lay on a sofa

in a cloud of green areophane, lighted dimly with milky pearls, looked not unlike some deep-sea siren.

She was quite alone in her cool little nest, and started eagerly up at sight of her golden-robed visitor.

"At last!" she cried; "and I had given you up! At last, Leonie; and how late you are!"

"I could not help it, dear," Miss De Montreuil said, sweetly, taking her place beside her. "We went to hear the new tenor in 'Lucrezia Borgia,' and stayed until the end of the opera. Ah, he is charming, and handsome as an angel on the stage; although I suppose, like the rest of these people, he owes half his beauty to wigs and paint. We are on our way now to Clara Leesom's; but, of course, disgracefully late as we will be, I insisted upon looking in for a moment to see *you*. And how are you to-night, dear?"

"Better, but a little tired now. My illness has left me weak as an infant. Leonie, I am dying to ask you if it is true about you and Mr. Rutherford?"

"Your mother told me you were," Leonie said, adjusting her bracelet. "If what is true, Ethel?"

"Oh, you know well enough! It is the talk of the avenue. They say you are going to marry him."

"Do they? I dare say they do. Well, and suppose I do?"

"Oh, Leonie! And Alwyn Bartram?"

"My love, I have not seen Mr. Bartram for three weeks. What would you have? One can't be faithful forever to the absent. He shouldn't stay away so long if he wants to keep his memory green. And then, Mr. Rutherford—ah, words fail, my dear, to tell how devoted that poor old man is!"

She laughed—the sweetest of little tinkling laughs, but hollow as a silver bell.

Her companion looked at her almost indignantly.

"And you are engaged to Alwyn, and you talk like this! Are you heartless, Leonie, as they say you are?"

Leonie shrugged her dimpled shoulders again.

"Do they say so? I dare say they are right. I dare say I am. As to being engaged to Alwyn Bartram, I am not so sure of that. We have been frightfully serious together—have exchanged pictures and rings, and all that—have talked more nonsense, and vowed more vows, than I care

to remember. But still—there is always a *but*, you see, Ethel—one isn't Mrs. Bartram yet; and—ah, well! the Rutherford diamonds are superb, and he doesn't know the depths of his own coffers. The temptation is strong, and poor little Leonie is pitifully weak."

"That means, then, you intend to throw Mr. Bartram over for the wrinkled old millionaire and his family diamonds?"

"How painfully matter-of-fact you are, my dearest Ethel! Still, it is best in these cases. Yes, my dear, in plain English, I am very strongly tempted to throw Mr. Bartram over for Mr. Rutherford. The one is young and handsome as a god—the other is old and ugly as a satyr; but, oh, my Ethel! he counts his dollars by millions, and dollars are the glory and bliss of life! What a shocked and horrified face you wear! It sounds very mercenary and very horrible, I dare say, but one may as well tell the truth. You see, Ethel, I have known what it is to be poor, and you have not, and that makes all the difference in the world. I have worn print dresses, and shabby bonnets, and old shoes, and lived in stuffy little back rooms, and dined on weak tea and smoked herrings before my uncle De Montreuil sent for me to France, and the horror of that horrible time has never been forgotten. I will never be poor again, Ethel—never, never, *never!*"

"You need not be, and still remain true to the man you love. For you *do* love Alwyn, do you not, Leonie?"

Leonie De Montreuil put out one little, dark hand, all a-glitter with diamonds and opals, and laid it in that of her friend.

"They say I am heartless, Ethel, and I know I am not like you, and not in the least like those superhuman girls one reads of in novels, who give up the world for love; but I do—I *do* like poor Alwyn! If he inherits his uncle's fortune, I will marry him gladly, although *then* he will not be half so rich as Mr. Rutherford. If he does not, I never will! No, Ethel, I never will! I can not be a poor man's wife."

"No need to be poor. He has his art. He can win his way to fame and fortune."

"Ah, bah! when both our heads are gray! No, no, Ethel, that will never do! If he inherits a fortune I will be his wife; if he does not, then I marry Mr. Rutherford.

That is why I have remained in New York. I am ready for either fate. I must make my own future. My uncle De Montreuil cares very little for me—cares less than ever since he has found out he has a daughter alive."

"A daughter! Is it possible?"

"Romantic, isn't it? but quite true, and here in America somewhere. When quite a young man, and foolish, as young men are apt to be, he fell in love after the most approved fashion, married, and ran away with a pretty, penniless Yankee bride. He was Monsieur Raoul, a teacher of music at that time, with very little hope that the family inheritance would ever be restored to him. But it was, and with the rise of Louis Napoleon, he arose, too. He left his wife, and went back to France, and once there—who knows how it was?—he never returned to her. But, when he came here with me this summer he sought out her friends, found she was dead, but had left a daughter. That daughter the indignant friends refused to restore him—not in the least dazzled by his wealth and his title. And, as he could not remain to enforce his rights, he has returned to France without her. He told me the whole story—*less* the names of the parties; and ever since I have felt my position as his future heiress most doubtful. He will return and find his daughter, I know; and where, then, is poor Leonie? No, Ethel, I should like to please you, to please Alwyn, to please myself; but I can not marry a struggling artist! His fate hangs on his uncle's will, and that is speedily to be decided now. He is back in the city—Alwyn. I had a note from him to-day, and expect to meet him at the ball. The uncle is very ill. He goes South to-morrow. As soon as the will is read, I shall know, and then—"

She paused, rose up, shook out her flashing skirts, and laughed lightly.

"I am a cold-blooded wretch, am I not, my dear, enthusiastic Ethel? I don't deny it. Mr. Bartram, after the fashion of loves and artists adores me as an angel of light *now*. If I fail him, I will sink to the lowest depths of infamy in his estimation. And yet, I am neither so good nor so bad as he makes me out. I am simply true to the teachings of my life—to the doctrine of society. All the nicest girls marry for money nowadays. They leave home on the same principle as their house-maids leave theirs—to

better themselves. Oh, what long speeches I have been making, and what a stupid talk we have had! But I want you to know me as I am, Ethel, and for the rest of the world I don't care a fillip! We won't talk of this any more. We will hope for the best. I may marry Alwyn, after all. And now, adieu, and *au revoir!* My chaperone will think I am lost."

She stooped and kissed her friend, and floated, like the fairy she was, in a golden mist away through the sea-green curtains and out into the glare and flash of the gas-lighted drawing-room, that was the only heaven she knew of or cared for. Beautiful, elegant, heartless—a creature to drive mankind mad for love, and never know the meaning of that sweetest word of all words herself.

Half an hour later, among the many beauties shining resplendent at Miss Leesom's birth night ball, floated in the beauty of the season, eclipsing everything around her, as a meteor eclipses common stars.

She floated up, in her sylph-like way, to the daughter of the house, and murmured sweetly her few words of congratulation appropriate to the occasion.

"We are terribly late, I know," she said, plaintively, "but we went to hear the new Italian tenor, and then looked in at poor, dear Ethel's. She is much better, and, of course, I lingered for a chat.

Every one is here ages ago, no doubt?"

"Every one!" the young lady responded, laughing. "Mr. Rutherford and Mr. Alwyn Bartram included. Mr. Rutherford is absorbed in whist in the card-room and Mr. Bartram is—"

"Here!" said a voice at her elbow.

He stepped forward as he spoke, with a glow on his handsome face, as he held out his hand to Leonie.

"It seems centuries since we met. How late you are, Leonie! I began to think you were not coming after all."

Miss Leesom, with a conscious smile, had glided away at once. Alwyn Bartram drew the gloved hand of the little belle through his arm with the air of one having the right.

"You received my note? You expected to meet me here?" he said, bending above her.

"Certainly," responded Miss De Montreuil. She was infinitely calm. No flush had arisen to her clear olive

cheek—no added sparkle to her eye at sight of her lover.
“How long you have been away, Alwyn!”

“Has it seemed long to you, Leonie? Have you really missed me?”

“Of course,” with one of her Parisian shrugs. “Are you not the best waltzer on my list? *Apropos*, I keep the first for you to-night. And you positively go South to-morrow?”

“Without fail. My uncle lies dangerously ill. I should have been on my way now. I may not see him alive as it is. But I could not go—I *could not*, Leonie, without coming here to see you.”

Miss De Montreuil pressed her pretty little patrician nose into her bouquet—a bouquet of rarest exotics sent her that afternoon by Mr. Rutherford, the millionaire.

“Very flattering, but very foolish. You risk your inheritance, do you not? But, perhaps, you have discovered that it is already secured to you?”

“Unfortunately, no. The issue is still doubtful. I have offended my uncle by rejecting his business, and he still labors under the impression that his favorite nephew, Robert Bartram, is alive. It is nine years now since Robert broke wild and fled from home and friends, but somewhere in the scheme of the universe he *may* still exist. My chance of inheriting my uncle’s fortune would be wretchedly slight, indeed, if he ever turned up.”

“Very unfortunate for you,” Miss De Montreuil said, coolly; “beyond that inheritance you have nothing but your art?”

“Nothing, Leonie; but that art shall yet win me wealth and fame. And you—oh, my darling! *you* will be equal to either fortune, will you not? *You* will not fail me?”

He looked down upon her for the first time with a pang of dread and doubt. He had drawn her away from the crowded ball-room into a dimly lighted conservatory, where a wilderness of camellias and magnolias hid them, and the air was heavy with the perfume of rose and jessamine. It was quite deserted—only the pallid Floras and Cupids among the rose and acacia-trees gleamed about them like marble ghosts.

Miss De Montreuil leaned lightly against a tall statue of Hebe, holding forth her cup of ambrosia, with a smile on her stone face. In the dim light she made a rarely lovely

picture, her shimmering robe flashing like spun gold, her opals glimmering, her graceful little head drooping forward, her dark, velvety eyes fixed on the frail blossoms she held. A rarely lovely picture—one any man who loved her might never forget—one that haunted Alwyn Bartram for weary years to come with a pang more bitter than death. *He* loved her passionately—intensely. You could see it in his glowing face, in his burning eyes, in the flush that mantled hotly his dark face. He towered above her—fairy sylph that she was—tall, strong, black-browed, a fitting mate for her; beautiful, in his man's beauty, as herself.

"You love me, Leonie, do you not? Oh, my darling, say it again! Nothing will ever make you false to the vows you have plighted? No loss of fortune will ever make you false to me? My Leonie! my own! tell me once more that you love me!"

"I love you!" she answered faintly, not lifting her eyes.

"And you will wait for me? I *may* not lose this fortune, but if I do you will wait? The waiting shall not be long. I feel that within me that tells me I am destined to achieve success. And if this fortune comes to me at once, *then*, Leonie, you will be my own without delay. You will bless me for life with this dear hand?"

He caught it fast, covering it with rapturous kisses.

"Yes," Leonie De Montreuil said, "if this fortune becomes yours, Alwyn, I will be your wife. Oh, surely—surely your uncle will make you his heir!"

"I hope so—I trust so. But still, if not—still, if it becomes Robert Bartram's—still you will be faithful and true—still, my dearest, you will wait?"

"For how long?"

"A year, perhaps—two at most. In two years I will have a name to offer my peerless Leonie, of which she will be proud, or I will burn my easel, and never touch paint-brush more. Two years is not long to eighteen and seven-and-twenty. My own dear girl will be true to her lover?"

She looked up suddenly, boldly, her great, black eyes flashing with a look that was almost defiance into his impassioned face.

"Alwyn," she said, "I will never marry a poor man. I do love you—Heaven knows I do—and I hope to be your wife! But I am not what you think me—what your enthusiastic fancy has made me. I also love wealth and lux-

ury, fine houses, fine dresses, rich jewels—all the glory, and brightness, and luxury of life! I should go mad, or die, as a poor man's wife. Look at these hands—were they made for labor? Look at me—am I of the clay they make household drudges? Inherit your uncle's fortune, Alwyn, and I will marry you and love you all my life. Fail, and—”

Her voice died away; her eyes fell; the color that had flushed for an instant into her rounded cheeks died out in ashen pallor.

She dared not meet the earnest face above her. He stood gazing down upon her, the truth slowly coming home to him for the first time that the woman he loved was cold-blooded, selfish and mercenary to the core of her heart.

“And if I fail,” he said, slowly—“if I fail? In the hour I lose my fortune, do I also lose my bride?”

“Don’t let us talk of it!” Leonie broke in, hurriedly. “Don’t let us think of it! We will hope for the best. You *will* inherit this dying man’s wealth, and Leonie will be all your own. Take me back to the ball-room, Alwyn; I shall be missed.”

She took his arm, to draw him away, looking up with the piteous, imploring face of a naughty child.

“Don’t wear that rigid scowl, please. Don’t be angry! If you go to-morrow, let us part friends. You will write to me at once, will you not? You know how impatient I shall be to hear how events turn out. There is our waltz. Come, Alwyn—come!”

“I shall waltz none to-night,” he said, moodily. “I only came here to see you, and it is time I was gone.”

“Then let us say good-bye where we are, and part,” Miss De Montreuil responded, readily, holding out her hand. “*Bon voyage* and all success! I shall count the hours until I hear from you.”

He caught her suddenly in his arms—a fierce, passionate, straining clasp.

“Leonie, Leonie! be true to me!” he cried. “I love you more than my life! If I lost you—great heavens, I should go mad! You will not be poor—I swear it! I will work for you like a galley-slave! I will toil my fingers to the bone! Oh, my love, my bride, be true!”

“I will be true—if I can,” she added, mentally. “For pity’s sake, Alwyn, let me go. Some one comes!”

She let him kiss her; then she fitted out of his arms like a spirit, and was gone. Back to the ball-room—back to the crashing music—to the lights, the splendor, the admiration—all that life held that was worth living for to her.

And Alwyn Bartram stood for an instant alone, amid the tropical plants, and pallid statues, with the same dull sense of despair at his heart that had filled Estella Malory's, not many days before.

"If I lose my fortune I lose my bride!" he thought, with that dull sense of horrible pain. "She loves me, but she loves wealth better. And if I lose her—"

He could not finish the sentence. Ten minutes later, when he came to say farewell to his hostess, she almost screamed aloud at sight of his white, drawn face.

"Good heavens! Mr. Bartram, you are ill! You look like a walking corpse!"

"Yes, I am ill," he said, hoarsely. "Pray excuse my hasty departure, and—good-night."

He turned abruptly to go. As he did so, he caught a last glimpse of his idol—not waltzing, but leaning on the arm of old Rutherford, the millionaire, her exquisite face luminous with smiles. He ground his teeth in jealous rage, and a second later was out under the chill morning stars.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS DE MONTREUIL DECIDES.

THE October afternoon was closing down rainy and raw as Alwyn Bartram sprung from the cab that had conveyed him from the station, and rang the door-bell of his uncle's house.

It was a dull old house, in a dull back street, with the noises of the city coming far and faint—doubly dull this wet October twilight. The whole front of the house was closed and dark, and the young man's impatient ring had to be repeated thrice before an answer came. Then the door swung back, and an elderly woman looked out.

"What do you wish?" was her sharp query. "Mr. Wylder is very sick, and can see no one. If it's a letter, the doctor don't allow him to read letters any more."

"It isn't a letter, madame, and Mr. Wylder will see me.

Be good enough to tell him his nephew, Alwyn Bartram, has come."

He made his way resolutely into the dim hall, despite the woman's resistance. But, at the announcement of his name, she suddenly subsided into civility.

"I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure, but I'm Mr. Wylder's nurse, and I only act up to my directions. So many gentlemen try to see him on business, you know, sir, and he isn't equal to business now. Please walk in; he expects you, I believe."

She closed the door again, and Mr. Bartram found himself in a long, dully lighted entrance hall, bare and bleak, with a wide, carpetless stairway at the further end.

"How is Mr. Wylder?" he asked; "any better?"

"No better, sir; he never will be better again in this world! He is sinking fast; he will hardly last the month out. If you will wait here, I will go up and tell him you have come."

She left him in the dark, chill hall, and ascended the stairs. In ten minutes she reappeared.

"Mr. Wylder will see you at once. You know his room, sir—please come up."

The young man ran up the stairs, along a second half-lighted hall, covered with a faded carpet, and tapped at the door of a room at the remote extremity.

A weak, shrill voice called "Come in," and opening the door, he found himself in the presence of the sick man, upon whose fiat the happiness or misery of his whole future life depended.

It was a large room, but chill and draughty, and lighted by a shaded lamp. A wood fire burned dully on the hearth, a threadbare carpet covered the floor, cane-seated chairs stood primly round the walls, and in the center of the floor was the large, old-fashioned four-poster, whereon the sick man lay. A patch-work quilt covered it, a round table stood near, strewn with medicine vials, glasses, gruel-bowls, and a slippery, leather-covered arm-chair stood beside it, close to the bed. Altogether the chamber looked dreary, and comfortless, and cold, and impoverished, and betrayed, in every thread of its worn carpet, in every creaky, time-worn chair that its occupant, if a rich man, was a miser.

He half-sat up in the bed now, supported by pillows. In the dim light the old face looked gaunt and pinched,

with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes. But the hollow eyes burned keenly still, and the thin lips were firmly, obstinately compressed.

"So you have come," he said, fixing those glittering eyes sharply on the handsome face of his nephew; "you have come, Alwyn Bartram, and in time. You see the old man is down at last, never to rise again. I knew you would be here, and in time for the death!"

"Let us hope better things, uncle," the young artist said, gently, bending above him, and taking the cold, limp hand lying loosely on the counterpane. "You are far from an old man yet, and people do not die with every illness. Let us hope a few weeks will see you restored again."

"Sit down," responded Mr. Wylder, harshly, "and don't be a hypocrite! I am going to die, and you know it, and you wish it."

Alwyn Bartram dropped his hand, and recoiled as if he had been cut with a whip. His dark face flushed deep, angry red.

"I do not wish it!" he said. "I have never wished the death of my worst enemy. Illness gives many privileges, but it gives you no right to insult me, Mr. Wylder."

"Well, sit down—sit down!" Mr. Wylder said, testily, but not displeased. "How touchy the boy is! Like his father before him—proud and high-stomached. There! take a seat, and don't let a sharp word from the old man mount you on your high horse. If you *did* wish for my death it would be nothing unnatural—nothing out of the ordinary course. The heir's feet always ache to stand in the dead man's shoes."

"I have never looked forward to your death or your wealth, Uncle Wylder," Alwyn said, rather coldly. "Your generous allowance has amply sufficed for every want, and I am not ambitious—in that way, at least. Live a score of years if you can, and enjoy the money you have earned; no one will rejoice more heartily than I."

"Well, well, well, don't let us talk about it. We will speak of yourself. What have you been doing since I saw you last?"

"Much the same as usual. Nothing of any great importance, I am afraid."

"And our wonderful art—our divine profession—in which we were to achieve such miracles—what of that?"

The young man reddened again at the sneer, this time not without a sense of guilt.

"The miracles are still unachieved. I paint, but my paintings are rejected. Yet still I hope I will one day be a painter."

"A modern Raphael, no doubt," the old man said, with bitter sarcasm. "Permit me to offer my congratulations beforehand. With such brilliant hopes of speedy fame and fortune, old Wylder, the money-grubbing, miserly stock-broker's wealth can matter little to you. It sets my mind at rest to know your future is secured, and leaves me free to follow my own inclinations."

"You are always free," Alwyn Bartram said, though his heart sunk within him. "The wealth you have amassed honorably, in the course of a long life, is certainly yours, to dispose of as you choose. You have been very good to me. Leave it as you may, I have no right to be anything but grateful."

"Ah, philosophic, I see! How coolly the young men of the present day take the ups and downs of life! Mr. Alwyn Bartram will scarcely miss what he values so lightly."

"You are determined to misunderstand me, uncle," the young man said, repressing his anger by an effort; "but you *always* misunderstood me. I suppose I am to conclude," looking him full in the eyes "that Robert Bartram is your heir?"

"If Robert Bartram be alive," the old man said, slowly—"yes."

Oh, Leonie! His thoughts went back to her as he had seen her last, bright, beautiful, heartless, with the sharpest pang he had ever felt in his life. "If your uncle leaves you his fortune, I will be your wife; if not—"

Alwyn Bartram turned very pale, but his dark, resolute eyes met those of the old man on the bed without flinching.

"Your fortune is your own, Mr. Wylder. You have every right to leave it to your favorite nephew. For me, I am hardly surprised. I think I expected this."

"There is still a chance," the sick man said, eagerly. "I can make a new will, and Robert Bartram was never my favorite nephew. Give up this nonsensical art; make

a bonfire of your easel and paint brushes; take to my business, and—”

He stopped short. His nephew had made an imperious gesture with his hand.

“I will never give up my art! It is dearer to me than anything else in the world—save one. I can never take to your business. I would be, indeed, what you called me when I entered this room—a hypocrite—if I promised that. Let Robert Bartram take your wealth, if Robert Bartram be alive, but I will never give up my profession while my fingers can wield a brush!”

The dogged resolution, characteristic of the race they sprung from, looked invincibly out of the defiant eyes of both.

“Be it so, then!” cried Mr. Wylder, setting his teeth. “You have chosen. The will that gives all to Robert Bartram is made; that will shall stand. For you, you lose everything—your yearly allowance and all.”

Alwyn Bartram bowed, still with that fixed, resolute face.

“And if Robert never appears?” he asked, steadily.

“In that case,” said Mr. Wylder, coldly, “the wealth shall not go out of the family. For the space of one year, vigorous search and inquiry shall be made for the missing man. If, at the end of the year, he appears, all shall be his. *All!* If he fails to appear, then, Alwyn Bartram, having no other living kin, it goes to you, undeserving as you are. I am not of the sort that found asylums and endow hospitals. But Robert Bartram will be found.”

“Have you any reason for thinking so?”

“None, except the old axiom that bad shillings always come back. And now, as I see by the clock yonder it is time for my supper and composing draught, you will be good enough to ring the bell for the nurse, and leave me. Your old room is prepared. How long do you mean to stay? Until all is over?”

“I will stay until you are better or—”

“Dead. I understand. Very well; but remember, my will is made. No act of yours now—no waiting, no devotion—can alter it. Robert Bartram takes precedence of you. I leave you nothing—*nothing*—not the price of a mourning ring.”

“You are exceedingly candid. Still, I will stay.”

He rang the bell. The nurse appeared.

"Good-night, uncle!" he said, kindly, pausing an instant by the bedside on his way out. "I wish you a good night's rest."

But the sick man turned away his head sullenly, and his nephew quitted the chamber and went straight to his own.

So it was all over, and he knew the worst. He sat down in his shabby little room, drew writing materials before him, and, without a moment's delay, began the promised letter to Leonie De Montreuil.

Decision, resolution, were the young man's characteristics. He told her the truth at once.

"I have lost all," he wrote, with tragical intensity—"even my yearly allowance. For the first time in my life nothing remains to me but my art. I am penniless—a worker for my daily bread. Well, be it so—that way honor lies. My future is my own to make, and it shall be one my Leonie will be proud of. Only wait, my darling. Be true and faithful for a little while; all will come right in the end. I remain here until the old man is better or dead; then back to New York, to love, to you, and my glorious idol—Art. Next winter I shall send a picture to the Exhibition that *must* succeed. Write to me, my own, my dearest, and let me see the precious words that tell my Leonie will wait for her adoring lover."

Leonie De Montreuil sat alone in her room—a room beautiful and luxurious as its beautiful and luxurious occupant. She sat by the window, still wearing her morning *négligé*, although the October gloaming was settling down over the avenue.

She lay back in her cushioned chair, two open letters in her lap, and an expression of unmitigated sulkiness on her dark face. One little, slippered foot beat an angry tattoo on the carpet, and the slender black brows were drawn in an impatient frown.

"And after all my waiting, after all my hoping," she thought, bitterly, "*this* is the end. Nothing but disappointment on either hand."

There was a soft tap at the door.

"Come in, Clara," she said, in French; "the house is thine own."

The chamber door opened slowly, and her friend and hostess, Mrs. Manners, a pretty young matron, swept

in, in rustling dinner-dress, ribbons fluttering, jewels sparkling.

"Not dressed yet?" she said; "not even commenced, and past six, my dear Leonie! Ah, letters! No bad news, I trust?"

"As bad as bad can be," Leonie said, bitterly. "I am the most unfortunate girl alive, I think. Turn which way I will, there seems nothing but vexation and disappointment for me."

Mrs. Manners threw herself into a *fauteuil*, and drew out her watch.

"An hour yet until the dinner-bell rings. I am glad I dressed early. Tell me all about it, *m'amour*. Who are your odious correspondents?"

"Count De Montreuil and—Alwyn Bartram."

"Ah, Alwyn Bartram! And what does our handsome artist say for himself? Is the rich uncle dead, and the 'curled darling of the gods' disinherited?"

"Yes, he is disinherited. All goes to a distant cousin."

"Robert Bartram—mad Robert. I knew him once. Poor Alwyn! What will become of him now?"

"Oh, he is to work wonders—to win for himself an immortal name, and wealth, and glory, with a few tubes of paint and a few yards of canvas! I have no patience with such ridiculous nonsense. Rubens and Raphael died along ago, and the race of immortals died with them. When Mr. Bartram has crows'-feet and gray hairs he may possibly have achieved a decent competence, if he has the talent he gives himself credit for. As it is—"

The young lady shrugged her shoulders, and deliberately tore his letter in two.

"And the other? What says the stately count?"

"That he is coming back to America to search for his lost daughter. A pleasant prospect for *me*! He will find her, of course. She will be his heiress, his idol, and I—I will be the companion, the poor relation—one step higher than mademoiselle's maid!"

She seized the second letter fiercely, and tore it also into fragments, as she spoke.

There was a soft rap; then the door opened, and the face of Aglae, Miss De Montreuil's maid, appeared.

The French girl held in her hand a magnificent bouquet of rarest exotics.

"With Monsieur Rutherford's compliments," she said, placing it before her mistress. "When will mademoiselle be pleased to dress?"

"In half an hour, Aglae. You may go."

She lifted the bouquet, her dark eyes sparkling. The bright little brunette was passionately fond of flowers, but even in this her taste was artificial. Only the frailest and costliest hot-house blossoms pleased her luxurious eye.

"Beautiful! Are they not?" she said, inhaling their rich fragrance. "Mr. Rutherford has exquisite taste."

"Or his florist," Mrs. Manners said. "But Mr. Rutherford's taste is undisputed—in some things. He admires *you*, my pretty Leonie. After all, let uncle and artist both fail, and Leonie De Montreuil need never sink into playing second fiddle. There are not a dozen wealthier men in wide America, my husband says, than William Rutherford."

There was a pause. Miss De Montreuil flung the torn fragments of her letters contemptuously away, and bent her face above the tropical blossoms.

"He dines here to-day?" she said.

"Yes. He haunts this house like a shadow of late. All's not lost that's in danger, Leonie. The wife of old Rutherford, the millionaire, will be a lady to be envied."

"Ah, but he *is* old Rutherford," Leonie said, plaintively, "and I don't like old men."

"Of course not; but, you see, unfortunately one can't have everything in this lower world. If one likes unlimited diamonds and pocket-money, a box at the opera, the best metropolitan society, a villa in the Highlands, a cottage on the Hudson, a brown-stone palace on Fifth Avenue, one must be content to endure a few drawbacks. If one prefers an artist, young, handsome, clever, penniless, a shabby tenement on the east side, print dresses, and a dinner of hash and weak tea at high noon, why one can have that, too. Only, if our friends cut us dead, and love flies out of the window after the honey-moon, and our beauty withers, and we find ourselves an object of compassion to gods and men, we have no right to complain. We have made our own election, and must abide by it."

There was blank silence. Miss De Montreuil was looking steadfastly out of the window. Mrs. Manners a second time glanced at her watch.

"Half past six. Really, Leonie, your maid will not have time to do herself justice this evening. I will go and send her up at once. Look your prettiest, and wear Mr. Rutherford's flowers, and be as sensible when he takes you in to dinner as it is the nature of eighteen to be. For the present, adieu!"

Mrs. Manners tripped lightly away, and sent Mlle. Aglae upstairs at once. She was very fond of her pretty guest, and the rich Rutherford was a remote connection of her own.

"I hope she will have sense," she thought, as she sailed into the drawing-room to receive her guests. "I hope she won't be silly and sentimental. And I don't think she will."

The dinner-bell was clanging forth its summons as Miss De Montreuil floated—she always floated—into the gas-lit drawing-room.

Very pretty she looked in her pink silk dinner-dress—the color of strawberry ice, with pearls in her rich black hair, and eyes like ebon stars. A cluster of Mr. Rutherford's waxen flowers nestled amid the foamy lace of her corsage, and Mr. Rutherford's old eyes absolutely lighted up as he recognized them.

He came toward her, and took possession at once, as one having the right—a short, stout, red-faced old man of sixty, with a protruding under lip and two or three double chins.

"Beauty and the Beast," whispered an envious admirer, hovering in the distance—"Venus and Vulcan, Miranda and Caliban, May and December!"

His companion laughed.

"Don't be slanderous. Is it a match, I wonder? I thought Mr. Bartram was first favorite there?"

"Mr. Bartram has been out of town over a week. Miss De Montreuil is a 'girl of the period.' How can she possibly remain faithful to an absent lover so long?"

"Don't be sacrastic. I think your May and December will make an eminently suitable pair. She has no more heart than a mill-stone, that girl. There she goes on old Rutherford's arm in to dinner."

"I pity old Rutherford. Come."

Miss De Montreuil and her companion were very silent all through dinner. Mr. Rutherford did not understand

the small-talk of society, and the pretty brunette was ever too languid to converse much.

But all through the meal his eyes wandered to her exquisite face, with a doting infatuation only to be seen in the eyes of old men making idiots of themselves.

"I am glad you wear my flowers," he said, in a fat whisper. "I hardly expected it."

"No? But they are so pretty, and I am very fond of flowers."

They had adjourned to the drawing-room, and Mr. Rutherford had drawn the little belle to a remote sofa just big enough to hold both. A young lady at the piano was singing a noisy operatic song, under cover of which more than one flirtation was carried on.

"Are you? Ah, how I envy the flowers! If I thought it would give you a moment's pleasure all the conservatories in New York would be at your service."

"You are very good."

Miss De Montreuil did not lift her eyes. She felt what was coming, and her resolution *might* give way if she looked in that vulgar red face.

"Do you know why I have come here to-night? Why I accept every invitation to this house? Why I am never happy out of it of late?"

"How should I?"

"Because *you* are here!" burst forth the millionaire; "because I am madly in love with you, beautiful Leonie, and want you for my wife!"

There it was! Leonie's heart seemed to stand stock still, and she felt herself growing cold all over. The odious red face was very near her own now.

"I'm an old man, Miss De Montreuil, but I am also a rich man, and I lay my heart and my fortune here at your feet. I will only live to gratify your every whim—I will be your slave, your worshiper—my gold shall flow like water at your bidding. Only say you will be my wife!"

His hot breath was on her cheek—his hateful face almost touched her own. Leonie De Montreuil turned for an instant so deathly sick with repulsion that her parted lips refused to obey. And yet the bad, ambitious purpose within her never faltered.

"Speak!" the old man said. "Some one may come. Speak, and tell me you consent. Promise to be my wife."

Some one *was* coming—Mrs. Manners. Leonie found her voice by an effort.

"You are very good," she repeated, shrinking back a little as she said it, "and I promise. I will be your wife."

CHAPTER XV.

"OH, MY AMY! MINE NO MORE!"

A SUNLESS and gusty November day late in the month, the dead leaves whirling in wild drifts before the chill wind, a threatening of snow in the leaden air. A dull and cheerless November afternoon, the black sky low-lying, a wail of coming winter in the sobbing blast tearing through the trees. And on this desolate autumn afternoon all that was mortal of Mr. Wylder, the wealthy stock-broker, was laid in its native clay.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!" The clergyman's teeth chattered in his head as he rattled over the burial service, and the group gathered around the grave, while the sods clattered down, shivered in their great-coats. There were not many mourners—the miserly stock-broker had made but few friends. Foremost among those few stood the dead man's nephew—the rejected heir, his handsome face very pale and grave, the wind blowing back his dark hair as he stood hat in hand. Disinherited as he was, he was yet generous enough to be sincerely sorry for the old man, his sole living relative, and hitherto his kindest friend.

The funeral over, Mr. Bartram made no longer delay in the Southern city. There was nothing now to detain him there, and he was feverishly impatient to get back to New York, to love, to Leonie. He had heard from her but once—the briefest of brief notes, in answer to that first impassioned letter. She was sorry for his ill-fortune; she hoped his bright dreams of future greatness might be realized; she hoped his uncle might yet relent, and—that was all. There was no promise of fidelity, no word of love or cheer, no assurance that she was ready to wait even one poor year. It closed coldly and abruptly, and no other letter had followed it.

Alwyn Bartram reached New York, and went to his lodgings at once to change his dress, preparatory to calling upon Miss De Montreuil. A pile of letters lay awaiting

him—chiefly duns. Ill news flies apace, and already the tailor and the bootmaker, and the florist and the jeweler, were sending in their little reminders to the discarded heir. Some half dozen cards of invitation were there, too—one to a *conversazione* at Mrs. Leesom's for that very night. He flung the duns aside, in angry impatience, and began his evening toilet at once.

"‘And the spoilers came down!’ How soon the vultures alight on the dead carrion! It is no longer Mr. Bartram, the prospective heir to the Richmond stock-broker's wealth, but Alwyn Bartram, the impoverished artist, whom those gentlemen dun. I begin to find out the pleasantness of poverty very soon. I suppose I must give up these apartments with the rest,” glancing around the elegant rooms, “and play Sybarite no longer. It must be bread and poor beef, and an attic chamber, and a threadbare coat for the future. No more little suppers at Delmonico's; no more lunches at the Maison Dorée; no more the opera, diamonds to give and to wear; no more party-going or a faultless taste in horseflesh. No more the old life—nothing but hard work for the next twelve months at least. Well, so that Leonie is true, *that* fate has no terrors for me. How strange she has not written—not one of my letters answered! Surely, she is ill or out of town!”

No; Miss De Montreuil was neither. Mr. Bartram discovered that, when, an hour later, he stood on Mrs. Manners's marble doorstep, she was well and still in town, but “not at home.”

He remembered afterward the odd look with which the servant regarded him as he said it, but he turned away carelessly, leaving his card.

“It is only a question of an hour or two,” he said to himself. “She is certain to be at Mrs. Leesom's.”

But again he was disappointed. When, a few hours later, looking wonderfully handsome and interesting in his mourning, Mr. Bartram presented himself in Mrs. Leesom's elegant drawing-room, he saw hosts of people he knew, but no Leonie.

“She is always late; she will be here presently,” thought.

The disinherited heir found that his story had preceded him, and was forced to listen to speeches of condolence right and left. But the handsome face was so infinite-

calm and serene that people began to think their condolences a little out of place.

His placid countenance only clouded for the first time when midnight came and his black-eyed enchantress still appeared not to light up the rooms with her beauty.

"How very late Miss De Montreuil is to-night!" he said, carelessly, to Clara Leesom. "And yet one invariably finds her here."

Miss Leesom turned suddenly round upon him, with a broad stare.

"What!" she exclaimed. "Is it really possible you don't know? Why, I thought of all people—"

She stopped abruptly, coloring a little.

A dull, quick pang of apprehension shot through the heart of the lover. He was right, then. Something had befallen his idol.

"Nothing has happened, I trust?" he said, fixing his eyes, with a powerful glance, upon the young lady's embarrassed face. "Miss De Montreuil is well?"

"Perfectly well, I believe; only— Is it really possible, Mr. Bartram, that you have not heard?"

His heart was plunging like a frantic courser against his side, and his voice was not quite under his control.

"I have heard nothing. Remember, I have but just returned to the city, within the past few hours. I called upon Miss De Montreuil, but she was not at home."

"Ah!" Clara Leesom said, and there was a world of meaning in the brief ejaculation. "Miss De Montreuil is invisible to most of her friends just now. And you really do not know? You, of all people! How very odd! I took it for granted every one knew it."

"Knew what? For Heaven's sake, Miss Leesom, what do you mean? Surely, surely," as a horrible pang of doubt shot through him, "she has not gone back to France?"

The young lady laughed.

"Oh, dear, no! quite the reverse. She is a fixture in New York now, I fancy. Mademoiselle Leonie is not here to-night because one has no time for society the week before one is married."

"Married!"

"Certainly, monsieur," gayly. "On Thursday next we will have the grandest wedding of the season. Grace Church will be crowded to see the bride—undisputedly the

handsomest of the year. And so you did not know? You really came here expecting to see her? *Ex-traordinary!*"

Miss Leesom settled her bracelets, with a light laugh, and glanced sidelong up at her companion. Truth to tell, she was not sorry to shoot a Parthian arrow or two at this handsome target, who had so often utterly overlooked herself for the fairer Leonie. If she had ever felt a jealous pang, she was amply avenged now. The face of the young artist had turned to a dull, dead white.

"Married!" he repeated, the word dropping mechanically from his lips. "Married! and to whom?"

"Oh, Mr. Rutherford, of course—the best *parti* in the market. You see, Mr. Bartram, Miss De Montreuil is an eminently sensible young lady, and, to be a little vulgar, knows on which side her bread is buttered. Mr. Rutherford is rather a determined old gentleman, and when he proposed, rumor says, it was after the fashion of the lady in the Irish song—'Take me when I'm in the humor, and that's just now.' Miss Leonie's coquetry would not do here. It was 'take me or leave me, and decide at once.' So she decided, of course—who could say 'No' to a millionaire?—and on Thursday next they are to be married. I am so surprised you have not heard it; it is the talk of the city. They say the *trousseau* is one of unparalleled magnificence, and the Rutherford mansion, up the avenue, is being refurnished in a style of princely splendor. Mr. Manners gives the bride away, and there are to be nine bride-maids—myself among the number. The happy pair go to the cottage in the Highlands for the honey-moon. The marriage has been hurried on preposterously, I think; but old men are *so* impatient, and Leonie seems to yield to all his whims with a docility one would never expect from her. At eleven o'clock, next Thursday morning the ceremony will take place. Of course you will make one of the bridal guests. You and Leonie were always such friends."

A second sidelong look of feminine spite and triumph. Miss Leesom's vengeance was complete. He had heard every word—every cruel, pitiless word—of this chatter. And *this* was the reason of the unanswered letters—of Leonie's dead silence. False!

But his white face told little. Even his voice, when he spoke—and it seemed to him he paused for an hour or two before finding it—was but slightly changed.

"This is all news to me. As you say, Miss Leesom, it is most extraordinary some of my many friends did not impart the agreeable intelligence sooner. And so Leonie De Montreuil is to be married to old Rutherford, and next Thursday is the day? I shall not fail to be at the wedding. Permit me."

He led her to a seat, dropped her arm without a word of excuse or apology, and walked straight out of the house.

He forgot to go to the cloak-room for his overcoat, and the November night was windy and cold. But he never felt it.

He walked straight on, whither he knew not, through the deserted city streets, his face set, his eyes fixed, his hand clinched. On and on; streets, streets, streets; homeless women flitting by him like dark phantoms; drunken men reeling on their way; policemen straggling along their beats. Overhead sparkled the frosty stars and the keen, yellow moon—the ceaseless watchers in heaven. He neither felt, nor saw, nor heard, nor suffered—he was merely stunned.

It was morning. The sun rose over the stony streets—those noisy, terrible streets of New York—and found him miles from home. With the new life of the new day, his stupor, his walking dream, ended.

He realized and remembered all. He was worn out; and despairing lovers must eat and sleep, although hearts be shattered and heads be reeling. Leonie De Montreuil was false, but Alwyn Bartram must go home and go to bed, and eat his breakfast presently, despite his bleeding wounds.

He hailed a passing stage, and was rattled down Broadway. At his hotel, he got out, went up to his own room, and flung himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed, worn out in body and mind. And sleep, the consoler, took him as a mother might her tired child, and in ten minutes all earthly troubles were ended, and he was wrapped in blessed Elysium.

It was long past noon ere the young man awoke. As he opened his eyes and started up, memory came back like a sword-thrust, and told him all.

False! false! false! his golden idol potter's clay—cruel, heartless, mercenary! On Thursday next to be married to old Rutherford, and this was Saturday morning.

"I will see her!" he said, setting his teeth hard. "From her own lips I will hear how false, and selfish, and cold-

blooded she can be! She *shall* see me face to face—she shall, by Heaven!—and then—”

His face was absolutely livid, his hands clinched, his strong white teeth ground.

“ And then,” he thought, in the fierce wrath and bitterness of his heart, “ men have shot women they loved for less!”

But, though Mr. Bartram might propose, it was for Miss De Montreuil to dispose. An hour after, when for the second time he presented himself at the Manners’s doorstep, the answer was “ Not at home.”

Mr. Bartram glared at the servant in a ferocious way that made the trained understrapper recoil.

“ Not at home! When *will* she be at home, pray?”

“ Can’t say, sir,” impassively, but keeping the door between them. “ Miss De Montreuil don’t receive callers this week.”

“ Then I wish to see Mrs. Manners.”

“ Not at home, sir.”

Again Mr. Bartram glared; again the tall footman recoiled in alarm.

It was plain enough the servant had received his orders. The troublesome lover was not to disturb the ante-nuptial serenity of the bride-elect.

“ Give Miss De Montreuil this when she *is* at home.”

He drew forth his card, and wrote rapidly on the reverse side:

“ I *must* see you! I shall see you! I will call again tomorrow at ten.”

The man took it with a bow. The next instant the house door closed with a sonorous bang upon the rejected lover.

Alwyn Bartram passed that night in a horrible fever of suspense, half the time pacing his room. Morning found him haggard, and hollow-eyed, and wretched. Ten o’clock, to the minute, saw him again at Mrs. Manners’s door.

“ Miss De Montreuil is engaged, and can see no one. She begs Mr. Bartram to excuse her.”

And, with the pitiless words, the door absolutely closed in his face, leaving him, white and stunned, on the threshold.

For fully five minutes he stood motionless; then, with a look on his face the heartless Leonie might never forget had she seen it, he turned away.

That was his last visit—the bride-elect was troubled no more. Immersed in diamonds, point lace, orange-blossoms and white moiré, there was little time left to think of her slaughtered victims; but at dead of night, in the quiet and darkness of her room, Alwyn Bartram's face rose before her, pale and reproachful as a ghost. She *had* loved him—she *did* love him, never so well as now, when of her own free will she gave him up forever.

"What a wretch he must think me! what a wretch I am!" she thought, covering the beautiful, wicked face with both hands. "I promised to love and be true to him always, and see how I keep my word!"

But the days went on. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and it was the "night before the bridal." Up in the bride's "maiden bower," all white and glistening lay spread the wedding paraphernalia. The *parure* of diamonds and opals, pearls and turquoises fit for a queen lay blazing in their velvet nests—Mr. Rutherford's princely gift.

If remorse clutched at Leonie's heart, she had only to lift the lids of those dark caskets, and the sunbursts of splendor there hidden consoled her at once.

Upon the bed, in all its white richness, shone the Parisian wedding-robe, the shining veil of priceless lace, the jeweled orange-wreath, the gloves, the slippers—pale as shimmering phantoms.

And, in the midst of all this dazzle and snowy glitter, the bride walked up and down, clad in a loose dressing-gown, all her rich black hair unbound, the beautiful face white as her dress, the great, luminous eyes darkly somber.

"They are beautiful," she said, turning those dusky eyes upon the blazing gems, the wonderful robe and veil—"they are magnificent! But after all, is the game worth the candle? Will Alwyn Bartram's face haunt me all my life long, as it has done since I lost him? Will he despise and hate me, and give his heart to some one else, and will I go mad and die with jealous rage and longing, when it is too late? Will diamonds, and dresses, and society, and all Mr. Rutherford's wealth can bestow fill this dreary void in my breast? I suppose I have a heart after all, and only

find it out by its aching. To-morrow I go to the altar, and sell myself, body and soul, to this old man—and oh, Alwyn, I love you! I love you! I love you!"

She sunk down in the darkness of her room—the lamps had not yet been lighted—down in the very dust, her face buried in her hands.

As she crouched there in a strange, distorted attitude of pain, her wild, loose hair streaming about her, the lover she had jilted would hardly have asked for sweeter revenge.

Presently—hours after, it seemed to Leonie—there was a tap at her door. She lifted her haggard face, but did not rise.

"It is I, my dear," Mrs. Manners's voice said; "open and let me in."

"Not to-night," was the answer; "my head aches. Leave me alone this last night."

"But, my dear, Mr. Rutherford is here, and most anxious to see you."

"I am not dressed. I am going to bed. Tell Mr. Rutherford I shall not leave my room to-night."

Mrs. Manners turned away with an impatient frown.

"Whimsical, obstinate girl! I believe she is in love with young Bartram, after all, and is repenting now that it is too late. But she will not draw back—that is one comfort!"

Leonie slowly arose, twisted up her loose hair, and sat down by the window. The November stars sparkled frostily, the full yellow moon lighted up the deserted avenue. No, not quite deserted; opposite, standing still as a statue, gazing fixedly up at her window, stood a tall, dark figure, motionless.

With a low cry, the girl drew back; no need to look twice to recognize Alwyn Bartram.

He had not seen her; she knew that, after the first wild pang of fear. But she could see him plainly, standing there, a tall, dark ghost, the moonlight streaming full upon his pale face. How deathly pale that handsome face was! In his shroud and winding-sheet it could never look more marble-like and rigid.

"And it is *my* doing," she thought, her heart thrilling, "and I love him! Oh, Alwyn! Alwyn! Alwyn!"

She fell on her knees, screened by the window-curtain, and watched. What would happen? what was he doing

there? Was he waiting to waylay and murder Mr. Rutherford on his way home? He was just the kind of man, this dark-eyed, hot-blooded, fierce-tempered lover of hers to do such a deed.

She shivered convulsively, crouching there, the throbbing of her heart turning her deathly sick. Oh! what would happen to-night?

Nothing happened. The house door opened; Mr. Rutherford came forth, and walked briskly up the avenue, and still the dark figure never stirrèd. It might have been carved in stone, so motionless it stood. Mr. Rutherford passed from sight—his home was but a few doors off—and Leonie breathed again.

"Thank Heaven!" she thought—"thank Heaven! It is to watch my window, not to commit murder, he is there. My poor Alwyn! my poor, poor Alwyn! Will any one in this world ever love me again as you do?"

The hours wore on, and still that strange vigil was kept. The despairing lover gazed at his lady's lattice, as hundreds of despairing lovers have done before him, and William Rutherford's bride-elect watched him on her knees.

Midnight came, passed, but he never stirred. Worn out at last, Leonie's head dropped forward on the window-sill, and she fell fast asleep.

* * * * *

The fashionable Broadway church was crowded. Silks rustled and jewels flashed, and perfume filled the air as the élite flocked in.

As Clara Leesom had said, Miss De Montreuil's wedding was to be *the* wedding of the season. The beauty of the bride, and the wealth of the bridegroom, were the talk of the city.

It was a clear case of buying and selling—every spectator there knew that; but society approves of this sort of thing, and society mustered strong to behold the bargain clinched. Long before the hour for the ceremony the stately church was filled.

They came at last—the bridal train. Mr. Rutherford, red-faced, portly, vulgar, self-conscious as ever. But no one glanced twice at *him*. A silver-shining vision swept up the carpeted aisle upon the arm of Mr. Manners—a vision of such dazzling beauty and splendor that society fairly caught its breath with speechless admiration.

Pale as a lily, but lovely beyond compare, in that exquisite dress and veil, half hidden in the silvery cloud of lace, the long lashes sweeping the colorless cheeks, Miss De Montreuil floated by as Miss De Montreuil for the last time.

Many a fair patrician bosom throbbed with bitterest envy as its owner gazed; many a masculine heart that should have been better regulated quickened its beating as she went by.

And standing near the door, half hidden by a marble pillar, was one whose dark face never moved a muscle as the radiant apparition flashed by.

He was long past that—poor Alywn Bartram! What he *had* suffered, what he *did* suffer words are weak to tell; but the haggard face and hollow eyes betrayed little of the deathly bitterness and despair within.

The organ pealed forth its grandest notes—the ceremony began. Dead silence fell—you might have heard a pin drop. The solemn words were spoken; the marriage rite was over; William Rutherford and Leonie De Montreuil were man and wife until death should them part.

The bridal *cortège* swept down the aisle and out. As the bride, leaning on her husband's arm, passed that marble pillar, a tall young man stepped forward, stood straight in their way, and looked her full in the face.

She just repressed a cry, and no more. A specter in its grave-clothes could hardly have been more terrible to her then; no dead man, murdered by her cruel hand, could have looked at her with more passionately reproachful eyes. Then he stepped back and let them pass.

The bridegroom's red face turned redder with sardonic triumph, and his fat, protruding under lip came out a little further. That was all; there was no scene; a very few noticed the young man at all.

The carriages rattled away, bearing off the happy pair to their blissful honey-moon. The crowd dispersed, chattering volubly; the church was deserted and closed. And Alywn Bartram stood alone in busy Broadway, with the garish sunshine everywhere, and the endless stream of life flowing by.

Alone! Friends, future, love, all lost—poor and alone! Oh, little Estella! if you were wronged, surely your hour of vengeance had come!

CHAPTER XVI.

ON CHRISTMAS-EVE.

"AND there is no hope, Doctor Sinclair?"

"While there is life there is hope, Miss Mallory."

Helen Mallory turned round from the window with a smile upon her pale face—a smile very sad to see.

"I think I know what that means—the old formula. Well, doctor, I am glad I know my fate. I thank you for your candor. How long will this fleeting flame of life last?"

"Impossible to say with any certainty, my dear Miss Mallory. Life is sometimes prolonged indefinitely in these cases, sometimes goes out like the snuff of a candle. Let us hope you may have many years before you yet. Don't distress yourself by dwelling upon what you have forced me to say. You may outlive the best of us."

Again Helen Mallory smiled—that faint, melancholy smile.

They were alone together—doctor and patient—in the pleasant drawing-room of the Chelsea home.

"You are very good, Doctor Sinclair. I am not in the least distressed. I have few ties to bind me to life. I have long suspected my fate, and I have looked upon death before now with a quiet eye. I will not detain you longer. Permit me to thank you once more for your candor, and—good-morning!"

The doctor departed. Helen sat down alone, her thin hands folded in her lap, her large, brown, melancholy eyes fixed on the quiet, sunlit street.

"So," she thought, with a strange calm, "I know the worst—I am to die. Well, as I said, there are few ties to bind me to earth. Death and the grave have little terror for me, and yet—poor Estella—it is hard to leave her alone and unprotected in this big, bad world. There is Norah, of course; but I had hoped to see her in the safe shelter of a loving husband's arms. My poor little Essie! She, too, has been learning life's bitterness of late. I almost wish Alwyn Bartram had never come here. I almost wish I had not written last week to ask him again. Is it you, Norah? Come in."

There had been a rap at the door. It opened, and Norah entered, with three letters and a paper in her hand.

"Postman's been, ma'am. I saw Doctor Sinclair go away. What does he say, Miss Helen?"

She spoke abruptly, not looking at her mistress. But Helen's face was changelessly calm.

"What I told you he would say, my good Norah. No earthly power can restore me to health. The fiat has gone forth—my days are numbered."

"These doctors know no more than other folks sometimes," Norah said, harshly. "I never had no great opinion of old Sinclair, either. Don't mind his croaking, Miss Helen. You will be better by the spring."

"I hope so, Norah," with a misty, far-away look in the beautiful eyes—"free from pain forever. Ah! what is this? A letter from France—from the Count De Montreuil! Norah, where is Estella?"

"Out walking, as usual. The child will wear herself off her feet. Yesterday she went to Chelsea Beach, to look at her old friend, the sea, she said. I shouldn't wonder but what she's gone there again."

But the mistress had not waited for the answer. She had torn open the large, official-looking seal, and was glancing eagerly over its contents. Norah waited near the door.

"What does he say, Miss Helen, please? He is not going to force away Miss Essie, surely?"

"He could hardly do that," Helen said, proudly. "He can not take Estella, unless Estella chooses to go. But he wants her—yes. He is quite alone in the world now, he says—the possessor of immense wealth, and the highest position in the brilliant circles of Paris. A favorite ward, the daughter of a distant cousin, whom some years ago, he adopted as his heiress, has recently made a wealthy marriage, and left him doubly alone. He wishes most ardently for his daughter. He asks me if it is fair to let old jealousies rankle between us, and keep Gaston De Montreuil's only child out of the lofty sphere in which he can place her. And, Norah, I begin to think it is not."

"What!" exclaimed Norah, shrilly. "You never mean to send the child away to that nasty foreigner—to that wicked, far-off city—among a pack of rubbishing French? You never mean to do it, Miss Helen!"

"Norah, that 'nasty foreigner' is the child's father."

"And what if he is? A pretty father he'll be to her! A pretty husband he was to his wife! Don't you do it, Miss Helen, or you'll repent it all your life, and break the poor dear's heart, besides. She's lonesome enough, and dismal enough, ever since that young man left last September without *that*. Drat the men!" cried Norah, with a vicious glare; "they're all alike."

Miss Mallory smiled, but the smile ended in a sigh.

"They make mischief wherever they go—don't they, Norah? Let us thank our lucky stars that we, at least, have escaped their clutches. Poor little Essie! It was all my fault, I am afraid, and she is so romantic, and Alwyn so handsome. Don't be too hard on him, Norah; he can't help that face of his, or all those winning ways, and he can't fall in love with our little girl and marry her, just to please two sentimental, match-making old maids. Here is a note from him, accepting my invitation to come and spend Christmas with us. Very good of him, is it not, to leave his gay life in New York, for our dull old Chelsea homestead?"

Norah's answer was a contemptuous snort.

"Better have let him stay—that's my opinion, Miss Helen; but it's likely you know best. He'll only make that child worse, with his wishy-washy picture-painting and piano-strumming, and song-singing, and walking, and gadding. He'll make her worse than she is, and that's bad enough, goodness knows, and then he'll go off at New Year's, and we'll all have the mopes for a month. You can do as you like, but if I was mistress I'd no more let a man near the house than I would a fiery dragon. There!"

"Norah, hush!" cried her mistress, impetuously.
"Listen to this."

She had torn open the third letter, and her thin cheeks flushed and her eyes kindled, as she read its few curt lines:

"FISHER'S FOLLY, Nov. 28th, 18—.

"MISS HELEN MALLORY: Madame,—It is my painful duty to announce to you the death of my friend and your nephew-in-law, Captain Roisten Darrell. The 'Raven' was wrecked off the coast of Bermuda, and all on board perished. I send you a paper containing a full account of the disaster. Mrs. R. D. is consequently a widow, and

when her wealthy father makes her his heiress, I trust to her generosity and sense of justice to remember handsomely the old man who was a parent to her for so many years.

"Very truly yours,

"PETER FISHER."

"There, Norah!" exclaimed Helen, eagerly, "Estella is free!"

"Thank the Lord!" said Norah; "not that I thought she was anything *but* free. Still, it's a great deal better he's drowned and out of the way; he can make her no trouble in the future. Don't sit up too long, Miss Helen, and don't tire yourself reading. Will I send Miss Essie to you when she comes in?"

"Yes; I will remain here. How relieved the poor child will be at the thought of her freedom! The fear of this Roysten Darrell has been her waking nightmare all along."

Norah quitted the drawing-room, and descended to the kitchen, to prepare supper. The short December afternoon, with its pale, yellow sunshine, speedily darkened down, and the twilight lay grayly in the dull street when the area door opened and Estella came wearily in.

She had sadly changed since the bright September. Her step was slow; her cheek was pale and thin; the glad, buoyant light was gone from the brown, beautiful eyes. She looked wan and weary as a tired spirit, coming in through the misty gloaming.

"At last, Miss Essie," Norah said, sharply. "I began to think you were lost. Where have you been all the afternoon, pray? Back to Chelsea Beach, I'll be bound."

"Yes," said Estella, listlessly. "I like to go there. It is like gazing on the face of an old friend to sit and look on the sea. Where is Aunt Helen?" moving away. "Up in her room?"

"No; in the drawing-room, and waiting for you—and good news, too."

"Good news!" Estella stopped short. "Oh, Norah! is it from—from New York?"

"From Mr. Alwyn Bartram?" said Norah, shortly. "Yes, she's got a letter from him saying he's coming to spend Christmas, if you call that good news. I don't! I wish he was at the bottom of Boston Bay—there! Go

along with you? I'm aggravated enough without you standing staring!"

Estella knew testy Norah well enough not to mind these little ebullitions of temper. Her heart gave a great bound at the news she heard—that poor, foolish heart that loved the handsome painter so dearly. He was not married yet, then, else he had not accepted Aunt Helen's invitation.

"He is mourning for his uncle, no doubt," she thought, "and must wait a little. It will come, all the same. Oh, what a foolish, foolish girl I am to feel like this, because I am going to see him once more—see him who does not care one straw for me! And he *knows* I love him, and I shall never, never be able to look him in the face again!"

She ascended to the drawing-room, and found Aunt Helen still seated by the window, her letters and papers loose in her lap.

She sat gazing dreamily out at the December twilight, lighted with sparkling, wintery stars.

"In the dark, auntie?" Estella said, quietly. "Shall I light the gas?"

Helen Mallory turned round to her niece with a bright, loving smile.

"Back, my dear? How tired you must be! Norah says you walk all the way to Chelsea Beach. Too far, my dear—too far!"

"I am so strong, auntie," with a dreary little sigh; "nothing hurts me. Norah told me you had good news for me—good news! What is it?"

She had lighted the gas, and now stood removing her hat and mantle. Helen Mallory, for answer, placed Peter Fisher's letter in her hand.

"Read that, my dear. Your bugbear will be your bugbear no longer. You need never fear Roysten Darrell on this earth again."

"Dead!" Estella said, her great eyes dilating. "Drowned! how terrible! And yet—oh, Aunt Helen, is it right to be thankful at any fellow-creature's death?"

"Let us forget him, my dear; let us only remember he can never persecute you more. You are free from his machinations forever—free to marry whomsoever you please. Will you read Alwyn Bartram's note. He is coming to spend Christmas."

The girl's pale face flushed. She took the note and ran

over the brief contents. Very brief—only two or three lines to say he would come. She did not give it back when she had finished; she crushed it in her hand, and kept it there.

"And here is a third letter from your father," Helen said—"the most important letter of the three. Essie, my dear, he wants his daughter very much."

"Does he?" very coldly. "Well, he can not have her."

"My dear, sit down and let us talk it over. My feelings have changed, Estella, toward the man who wronged my sister. We must forgive, as we hope to be forgiven. And, after all, no one alive has the claim upon you he has—your father."

"A father I have never seen—whom I never want to see. Aunt Helen what have I done that you wish to be rid of me? to send me to this strange man?"

"Essie dear, you know better than that—you know I could not part with my little girl if I tried. It is not that I wish to send you away—it is that I must leave you, and very soon."

"Leave me, Aunt Helen?"

"Dear child—yes. Doctor Sinclair was here this afternoon while you were out, and what I have long suspected will come true. You know what I mean, Essie. I have spoken to you of this before. Death will part us, and very soon."

"Auntie, auntie—don't! I can't bear it!"

She could say no more. The quick tears of sixteen started and choked her voice; Helen Mallory's own eyes were humid.

"I don't say this to distress you, my pet—only to show how soon we must part. And I can not leave you alone with only Norah for a protector; therefore, when I go, I think—I really think, Estella, you must return to your father. I *had* hoped—but I am only a foolish, sentimental woman, and that hope is past."

Estella lifted her hand and kissed it. No need of words to tell what that past hope had been.

"I will write to your father in the course of a few weeks, my dear, and tell him all. When I am gone—my child, my child, be calm—he will come for you, and take you to sunny France, where my Estella will reign *en*

princesse. But while I live, my dear, we will never part. Let us talk of this no more; let us wait and trust in the good God not to separate us too soon. Come, dear child: Norah will be waiting supper."

The subject was dropped; not one of the three spoke of it again, but on every heart the thought of the coming parting lay like lead.

"I can not reconcile myself to let her go to her father," Helen Mallory thought. "Oh, why could not Alwyn love her and marry her—my pretty Essie? Why must things go so crooked that might be straight? My fortune would render him independent of his profession and his uncle, and she would make him such a dear little, loving wife. I should have nothing left to desire, if I could only see her his wife."

The December days wore on. Life went very quietly in that dull old house with only those three women. Alwyn Bartram's coming was the only event likely to disturb the stagnant current of their slow lives. To Estella fell the pleasant task of preparing his room—and oh, what pains the girl took to beautify and adorn that sacred chamber! The books he had read, the pictures he liked, the colors he preferred, the flowers that were his favorites, all found their way there. Brightly burned the fire on *his* hearth-stone, and Estella's Christmas-gifts—slippers, dressing-gown and smoking-cap, all her own handiwork—lay awaiting the coming of the dark-eyed hero.

He came at last—a week before Christmas—late in the evening of a snowy, windy day. A cab rattled up to the door—trunks and valises were taken off, and Mr. Bartram himself, in furred cap, and long, picturesque cloak, sprung out and rang the bell.

Estella saw him from the drawing-room window, where she had hidden behind the curtain, and her heart throbbed at the sight of that tall, graceful form, as though it would burst its way and fly to him. Another instant, and she heard his voice in the hall greeting Norah and Aunt Helen—that dear voice, the sweetest music earth ever held for her! Another, and he would be before her in the drawing-room.

A sudden paroxysm of girlish fear seized her; she fled incontinently up to her own room.

"How shall I meet him?" she thought, hiding her burn-

ing face in her hands. "Oh, how shall I meet him, when I love him so dearly—so dearly—and he knows it?"

She heard him pass into his apartment—she heard Aunt Helen give him half an hour to change his dress before dinner.

"We dine late, out of compliment to you, Alwyn," Miss Mallory said. "You are accustomed to late hours, of course; so don't spoil Norah's temper and broiled birds by keeping us waiting. How do you like your room? Estella arranged it."

"It is perfect! Mademoiselle's taste is exquisite. Where is she, pray?"

"In her room. Don't stand talking! Beautify yourself, and come down."

Miss Mallory descended. Estella went over to the mirror for a parting peep.

How would *he* think her looking? she wondered. She had taken such pains with her toilet; she wore all the colors he had told her she should wear, and the mirror certainly reflected back a bright little image.

The silk dress of brilliant blue set off the fair complexion and shining brown hair. The thin, pale cheeks were flushed, the yellow-brown eyes full of streaming light.

Yes, she was pretty; but the image of that pictured face arose before her—the darkly beautiful face of Leonie—and she turned way in cold despair.

"What does it matter?" she thought, bitterly; "what does it signify whether I look well or ill? *He* will never glance at me twice!"

She went down to the drawing-room, and, seating herself at the piano, began to play softly in the fire-light.

She had a natural talent for music, and already her singing and playing were the pride of Helen's heart. That fond protector looked at her now with kindling eyes.

"How pretty she is! how pretty—how pretty!" she said, to herself. "Surely, Alwyn Bartram must be stone-blind if he does not admire my brown-eyed darling. Only, unhappily, admiration is not love."

Alwyn Bartram entered as the fancy crossed her mind, and walking over to the piano, held out his hand to Estella.

"We meet sooner than we thought last September, Miss Essie," he said. "Tell me you are glad to see me again."

She laid her hand in his, her fingers turning cold in his grasp—her voice quite gone. She tried to say something, but only an inarticulate murmur came.

Norah appeared to the rescue.

"Dinner, Miss Helen!" throwing open the drawing-room door, sharply; "and everything getting cold."

Mr. Bartram drew Estella's hand within his arm, and followed Miss Mallory to the dining-room.

Here the gas blazed down upon the antique silver and china, and here, for the first time, the female triad had a full view of their guest.

"Alwyn," Miss Mallory said, hurriedly, "have you been ill?"

For the dark face looked haggard and worn, the cheeks sunken, the large eyes hollow, and deep lines that only time or trouble can plow furrowed the smooth, broad forehead.

"He's got ten years older since last September!" cried Norah. "He looks like a man just out of a sick-bed."

Estella's great brown eyes fixed themselves in wordless inquiry upon the handsome, altered face. She, too, saw the change.

Alwyn Bartram laughed, but the laugh sounded hollow and mirthless, and a fierce flash shot from his somber eyes.

"Sick?" he said. "No, I am never sick. I have been working hard—that is all. I have to labor for my daily bread now, you know. Helen, never mind my haggard looks—a week in old Chelsea will set me up again."

"Can it be the loss of his uncle's wealth?" thought Helen. "He is in debt, no doubt—young men are always in debt. Something is certainly wrong. Ah, if he would only marry Estella, and take my fortune, how gladly I would resign it! If I could only summon courage to speak."

"Can that beautiful lady have deserted him?" thought Estella, stumbling unconsciously upon the truth. "Some great trouble has surely come to him. But, no! No lady alive could prove false to him!"

"He's bilious," thought Nora; "your dark, thin people are always bilious, and, I dare say, if the truth was known, he drinks more than is good for him. Young men always do; and they sit up all night playing cards and going to parties. He's bilious—that's what's the matter."

So each had her own theory, but no one spoke. There was that in the rigid compression of his mustached mouth, in the fiery gleam of his hollow eyes that warned them his altered looks was dangerous ground. He eat and drank, he talked and laughed; but the appetite for Norah's dainties was forced, and the talk and the laughter had a forced and joyless sound.

Helen Mallory watched her guest very closely, very silently, during the next three or four days. He had set up his easel in his pretty room, and worked hard; and Helen had a fancy for taking her sewing and sitting by the sunlit window while he painted. Sometimes Estella came, too, but not often; she had her studies, her music, and dearly as she loved to be near him she yet shrank from the gaze of those powerful dark eyes.

Did he not know her secret? Must he not in his inmost heart despise her for her folly? And Alwyn Bartram smoked and painted, and the dark gravity of his face never wore away, and the smiles that answered Helen's were cold and flitting as starlight on snow.

"Alwyn," she said, tenderly, one evening, "what does it all mean? Will you not tell the friend, who loves you almost as a mother might love, this great trouble of your life? It is not the loss of John Wylder's wealth—I know that."

It had grown too dark to paint. They sat alone together in the December darkness, only the flickering light of the fading fire lighting the room. The young man's face, in the luminous dusk, looked cold and fixed as stone. She laid her hand upon him, and bent toward him.

"Alwyn, my boy, tell Helen what it is. Who knows? she may be able to help you."

"No one can help me, and I need no help," he answered, in a cold, measured voice. "I have been a fool, and have met a fool's punishment—that is all. I richly deserve what I have suffered—what I suffer still. I have been the most egregious idiot, Helen Mallory, that ever laid life, and heart, and soul at a woman's feet, to be trampled on at her pleasure!"

"A woman! Then I was right—it is not the loss of your inheritance, after all?"

"My inheritance? no—and yet, yes, for the loss of it has lost me all. It is an old story, Helen, and not worth

repeating—the old story of Delilah over again. I trusted, and have been betrayed; and when a man has played the fool as long as I have, he can not become wise all in a moment. We'll not talk of it; deeper wounds than mine have been cauterized, and I richly deserved it all."

Helen looked at him wistfully.

"My poor boy! if I could only console you! Oh, Alwyn, if you had only turned to the girl who loved you, not to the girl you love!"

"I love no one!" he answered, sternly—"no one! But I don't understand. Who is mad enough, blind enough, to love me?"

"Alwyn, do you really need to ask that question?"

There was silence. The winter twilight deepened and deepened; she could hardly see his face now.

"I think I understand you," he said, slowly; "I suppose you mean Estella. But you are mistaken; she is only a child, and she cares for me as she does for Edgar Ravenswood, or Ernest Maltravers, or Vivian Grey, or any other of her ideal heroes. She is a romantic child, and I am to her what they are—an image to dream of for a week or two, until a newer hero comes. Your little niece does not know what love means."

"I hope so," Helen said, quietly, repressing a sigh. "Perhaps you are right; and yet—oh, Alwyn! could you not care for her? She is pretty enough, surely."

"Too sweet and too pure for me. No, Helen; I have done with love and love-making forever. The lesson one false woman has taught me shall last me all my days. I would not darken our pretty Essie's young life if I could by linking it with mine. And, besides, how could you part with her? She is all you have."

"We must part," replied Helen, "and before long. I suppose it is the dread of leaving her alone and friendless that makes me speak. My fortune, Alwyn—no princely one, it is true—would still have sufficed for you and her, even if Robert Bartram should turn up. It has been the dream of my life to see her your wife, but like most of my life-dreams, it seems doomed to disappointment. Look in my face, Alwyn, and read my fate there. Essie and I must part. At least you will be as a brother to her when I am gone?"

"Dear Helen, could I be less? I have no words to tell

you how sorry I am, and yet I have suspected something of the kind this many a day. Still, let us hope the time of parting may be far off; some one more worthy of your pretty niece than a jilted wretch like me may have wooed and won her long before. She cares nothing for me, and I would be a villain, indeed, if I tried to link her bright life to such a wreck as mine has become. Men's hearts don't break easily; but better men than I have gone headlong to perdition for less provocation than a false woman has given me."

Silence fell. Alwyn Bartram rose, after a time, and quitted the room.

"I will take a turn in the starlight and smoke a cigar before dinner," he said. "Tell Norah not to fidget. I'll keep nobody waiting."

And so it had ended. Helen Mallory got up with a long-drawn sigh and went slowly to her room.

"Like all the rest," she thought, bitterly; "like every hope of my life—doomed to end in nothing."

Next day was Christmas-eve—bright, sparkling, frosty. All day long Estella flitted like a brown-eyed bird from room to room, decking them with wreaths and evergreens, and singing as she worked.

She loved Alwyn Bartram, her dark-eyed, moody hero, very dearly, very hopelessly, but her heart was not quite broken, and possibly never would be.

She could sing still—one can hope so much from young persons of sixteen. Helen was ill—an attack of nervous headache that kept her confined to her room.

Mr. Bartram was finishing his Christmas picture—a little German scene of Kriss Kringle—a pot-boiler, such as he had to paint and sell now to appease his relentless creditors.

Norah, down in the kitchen, was immersed in her turkeys, and mince pies, and plum pudding.

The day went—the day whose one event was to alter the whole future lives of Alwyn and Estella.

That event was the coming of the postman. It was already dark—the short December day—when the sharp ring echoed through the house. Estella ran to the door. There were a half a dozen letters for Alwyn Bartram. Her light tap made the artist drop his brush and open the door.

How pretty she looked! His lamp was lighted, and in its glow he could see the flushed cheeks, the sparkling eyes, the smiling lips. How pretty she was! His artist's eye lighted as he saw her.

"Letters for you, Mr. Bartram."

She dropped them in his extended hand, and was gone.

The young man's face darkened into an impatient frown. Letters of late had been one of the most annoying events of his existence.

"More duns," he thought, angrily. "The harpies will have their pound of flesh, do what I may. I work like a galley-slave, but I can not appease them."

He tore open the buff envelopes. Yes, duns—duns pathetic, duns eloquent, duns vituperative—five of them!

To make the matter worse, they were debts contracted for faithless Leonie—the jeweler, the florist, the bookseller, etc. He set his teeth hard, and flung them one by one into the fire.

The sixth was different—a gossiping letter from an artist friend. He took it up with sullen indifference, but soon he became absorbed heart and soul.

"There is little news," wrote his friend. "The city is quiet. The festive season drags on slowly enough. The one event of interest in our circle is the return of your old flame, the brilliant Leonie. I met them—Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford—last night, at the Lessom's, and she was too beautiful and too magnificent to tell. Some one spoke of you—mentioned you had gone heiress-hunting to the Hub, now that Uncle Wylder had failed you, and said we might look for a Mrs. Bartram—a three-bullion heiress—upon your return. You should have seen little Leonie's insolent smile, the triumphant light in her eyes, as she slowly lisped:

"I think not! The greatest heiress in the United States could not tempt Alwyn Bartram now! Poor fellow! the loss of his fortune was a sad blow. I suppose he is trying to conquer trouble by hard work."

"Confound the impudent little monkey! It would have done me good to shake her there and then. Every one laughed—every one knew what she meant. By Jove! Bartram, it's a thousand pities you can't hunt up a Boston

heiress, and fetch her back Mrs. A. B. It would be glorious revenge on the heartless little De Montreuil."

Alwyn Bartram read no more. His face had turned white and rigid with suppressed passion, his black eyes glowed like coals of fire. A moment he sat, his teeth locked, his hands clinched in a paroxysm of rage not the less deep and deadly because still. Then he started to his feet.

"I will!" he hissed—literally hissed. "It is not too late yet for revenge!"

In another minute he stood knocking at Helen Mallory's door. She opened it herself, pale and worn-looking, still wearing her loose morning-robe. Only the shadowy fire-light lighted her room; she could hardly see her visitor's face.

"Helen," he said, in a voice strangely hard and cold, "I have been thinking over what you said to me last evening. I have changed my mind. I am going to ask Estella to be my wife."

"Alwyn!"

She could just gasp the name—no more.

"She is in the drawing-room, no doubt. I hear the piano. I have your best wishes, have I not? If I can win her consent, I will marry her before the New Year begins."

Estella sat alone at the piano, playing and singing softly, in the December dusk. The light of the rising moon streamed in white and chill, and lay in squares of luster upon the carpet and upon her ringleted head.

She was dressed for dinner—in bright rose-hued merino, with ribbons fluttering and jewels sparkling about her, and her song was a plaintive little love chant:

"Soft and low I breathe my passion."

The door opened hastily; some one strode quickly in.

She looked up, thankful that the wintery twilight hid her flushing face, her heart beginning to throb as it always throbbed when the hero of her life came.

A moment and he was bending above her as he had never bent before.

"Go on, Essie," he said; "finish your song."

"It is finished. I hardly knew I was singing. I was only trying to pass the interval between dressing and din-

ner. It is dinner-time, is it not? And Aunt Helen—has she sent you for me?"

"Aunt Helen is not coming down, I think. I saw her a moment ago at the door of her room, and she was not dressed. I am afraid she is ill."

"Ill!" Estella rose up in quick alarm. "Oh, Mr. Bartram, what is it? You know the doctor said— Oh, I must go to her at once!"

He laid his hand upon her shoulder, and gently held her back.

"One instant, Essie—only one, and you shall. She is waiting for you. She knows why I have come here. She knows I have come to ask you to be my wife!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A WEIRD WEDDING.

THE murder was out—blurted abruptly enough. The words were plain, Heaven knows, but the girl stood like one who does not understand, staring with wild, brown eyes.

"Do you hear me, Essie? To ask you to be my wife! I have Aunt Helen's best wishes and consent. Have I also yours?"

The words were very gentle, the voice low and soft, but underneath there was a hard intonation, a cold, metallic ring.

In the moment of asking, he despised himself. It was the first mean and cowardly action of his life.

"Speak, Estella," he said, impatiently—"speak and tell me! Will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

"Your wife?"

She gasped the words. Then she stopped. A flood of celestial bliss seemed suddenly to fill her heart. Oh, was she dreaming, or did earth hold such rapture for her?

"My wife, Essie—mine, your whole life long! I will do my best to make you happy. You shall never regret it, if it is in my power. I am not a good man, but I will do my best, by and by, to become worthy my dear little bride. Essie, Essie! is it to be yes or no?"

He bent above her; he tried to see her face. The momentary excitement of love-making, like the excitement of

gambling or horse-racing, had carried him away for the time being, and he was really in earnest.

He wanted Estella to say yes now. But Estella had covered her face with both hands, and sat trembling from head to foot.

"Estella! Estella!" he exclaimed, bitterly, "you too! And I thought you cared for me a little."

At that cry, selfish and empty as it was, her hands dropped. She lifted one of his, and kissed it passionately.

"I love you with all my heart," she said, with something that was almost a sob. "I have loved you from the first. Oh, Alwyn, do you mean it? Can you care for me?"

"Very much, my dear little girl," he answered, with the sharpest pang of humiliation and self-reproach he had ever felt in his life. "It is not so difficult a matter. And you will really be my wife?"

"If you wish it."

He drew her to him, and kissed the white, pure brow with remorseful tenderness.

"I wish it more than anything else on earth just now. And so you really love me, my poor little Essie?"

"With my whole heart."

He held her in silence, his own heart full of passionate bitterness and remorse. What a wretch he was—what a mean, despicable wretch—in his own eyes!

The girl's happy face lay hidden on his shoulder—the face of this girl who loved him—where so often the false, beautiful face of Leonie had lain.

"Cheat and hypocrite that I am!" he thought; "and this poor child really loved me from the first! It must atone—it shall atone! I will devote my life to her! I will make her happy if I can!"

He lifted the drooping face, all rosy with blushes, and looked at it. Even in the dusk he could see it radiant—glorified with new-born bliss, rosy with luminous light.

"My pretty little Essie! my bright little fireside fairy! And when is it to be?"

"What?" in the shyest of happy whispers.

"Our wedding-day."

She gave a little hysterical laugh, and the roseate face hid itself again.

"I—I don't know. Whenever you and Aunt Helen like."

Alwyn Bartram laughed—for the first time, perhaps, since Leonie De Montreuil's wedding-day.

" You good little girl! it shall be very soon, if it depends on me. Why not before I return to New York, next month?"

She did not speak. Literally she could not. The flood-tides of bliss were too high; her sudden happiness was too great for words.

" Run away and ask Aunt Helen," he said, opening his arms and letting her go. " It must be as she says; only coax her, Essie, to name an early day."

She flitted from his embrace—out of the room and upstairs—with winged feet.

" Oh, in all this wide world," thought rapturous sixteen, " is there such another happy girl as I?"

Alwyn Bartram, left alone, leaned moodily against the mantel and stared in the fire. He had done it, then. He had followed Mrs. Rutherford's brilliant example, humbly and afar off, and " bettered himself."

He had won a wife and an heiress. The harassing duns, those barking curs, could be muzzled now, as soon as he pleased, and Mrs. Rutherford would see that her victim was not quite so much her victim as she thought. His revenge was complete; he could pay her back at last in her own coin.

" For she *did* love me," he said, setting his teeth; " she *does* love me, as much as it is in that cold, selfish, mercenary heart of hers to love. She does love me, and she shall meet my wife face to face, and every pang she has made me endure she shall endure in return threefold!"

It was the hour of his triumph, and yet—oh, words are weak and poor to tell the bitter self-scorn and loathing that filled his heart! What a pitiful part he was playing—what a pitiful, spiteful part! What a false, deceitful traitor he was to those two women—the only two in the wide earth who really cared for him!

" They love you," his reproachful conscience said, " and see how you repay their love!"

He started up and began to pace hurriedly to and fro. In all the passionate misery of his undisciplined heart he had never felt as he felt this moment.

" And she loves me," he thought, bitterly, " and she has told me so. I would be the basest villain on earth to

retract now. If it can add one iota to her happiness to be my wife, my wife she shall be!"

A shrill scream answered him. Flying feet came down the stairs—the door was flung open. Pale and wild, Estella stood before him.

"She is dead!" she cried. "She is lying on the floor like a stone! Oh, Mr. Bartram, come!"

She sped away like the wind. The young man followed her at once; by intuition he understood all.

He followed her upstairs to Helen Mallory's room. There on the floor lay Helen face downward, white as death, still as death, and almost as cold.

"Ring for Norah," he said, hurriedly. "I will go for the doctor at once."

He lifted the light form and laid it upon the bed. She had slipped from her chair, and never moved after she fell.

Estella rang a sharp peal, and then lighted the gas. A flood of light fell full upon the marble face.

"She is not dead," Alwyn said, ashen pale himself. "It's only a death-like faint. Tell me where Doctor Sinclair lives; I will go directly."

It was Norah who told him. Estella had fallen upon her knees by the bedside in a wild outburst of passionate weeping.

He hurried from the room and house at once, his own plans dissolving in thin air before the awful presence of death.

Yes, death! Dr. Sinclair bent above the rigid form, half an hour later, with a face of dark, ominous gravity.

"She will never rise from this bed," he said, solemnly. "This death-like swoon is the beginning of the end. She may live to see the new year dawn; she will never live beyond it. I feared this, but not so terribly soon. I warned her, and she knew her fate."

The physician applied restoratives for a weary while in vain; but the large, sad eyes opened at last, the white lips wreathed themselves in the old, gentle smile.

"What is it?" she asked. "Am I ill?"

Their faces answered her. The sound of suppressed sobbing came from the foot of the bed. The soft, dark eyes turned tenderly upon Estella.

"It has come very soon," she whispered to the doctor,

with her mournful smile—"sooner than we thought, my old friend. How long before the end?"

"My dear Miss Mallory—"

"Tell me the truth, Doctor Sinclair, if you are my friend! I can bear it, and I most know. How many days—how many hours?"

"You will live to see the new year, I hope."

"So long? That is well. I will have the desire of my heart, then, before I go. Alwyn," she held out her hand feebly, her smile at its brightest, "the last thing I remember is something very pleasant—something you told me—something I have longed ardently to hear. Surely it was not a dream?"

He kissed the slender hand with eyes that grew dim.

"It was no dream, dearest Helen. Estella will be my wife."

"I am so glad—so glad! I can die in peace now, Alwyn. Oh, my boy! she *did* love you, did she not?"

"She is an angel, and I am—" He stopped short. "But I will become worthy of her—she shall be happy. I swear it by your dying bed, Helen!" he cried, with sudden passion.

That oath! Could he have seen the future—could he have known how awfully it was destined to be broken—how terribly it would haunt him in the days to come! That impetuous oath! And, if he had loved her, what need to swear at all?

"I can die happy," Helen murmured. "My darling will no longer be friendless and alone. And before I go, Alwyn, I must see her your wife. By my death-bed she shall become yours forever. I will have nothing left on earth to wish for then."

"Miss Mallory is talking too much," Dr. Sinclair said, sharply. "I can't allow it. She must drink this, and go to sleep."

He had not heard a word—neither had Estella. The young man retreated as the physician advanced, cup in hand.

"You will sleep after this. Don't excite yourself—don't talk. I will not be answerable for the consequences."

She took it like a child, and closed her eyes, with a long, satisfied sigh.

"I am tired," she said. "I will sleep. Tell Estella to sit by me until I awake."

And then the brown eyes closed, and, with her darling's hand in hers, she drifted away into dreamland.

No one went to bed that night. Through its long, cold hours, they sat beside her—Estella and Norah—and Alwyn Bartram paced the corridor outside. He could never retract now—the half-formed resolution he had made down-stairs to draw back from this loveless marriage could never be carried out. It was too late. Estella loved him, and had told him so. He would be a villain, indeed, to tell her the truth after that. And the glad light in Helen's dying eyes! No; it was too late—too late!

What Alwyn Bartram suffered that night, in his self-scorn and humiliation, was known only to Heaven and himself.

Morning came—Christmas-day, with brightest sunshine and clanging bells. But the jubilant sunshine was shut out of that sick-room, and, in its dusky light, the face of the sick woman looked hardly whiter than that of the pale girl who bent above her.

"You must go to bed, Essie," Mr. Bartram said, authoritatively, coming in, "or we will have two patients before the day ends. You are as white as the snow-drifts outside."

The wonderful brown eyes lifted themselves to his face with a look of inexpressible love. How sweet it was to be cared for by him! She rose at once to go.

"And I have been talking to her for the last two hours to go to bed, and all in vain," grumbled Norah; "and one word from him does it. Drat the men! He's got her bewitched, like all the rest."

Mr. Bartram swallowed a cup of coffee, snatched a couple of hours sleep, had his morning walk and smoke, and went on with his painting. He was no use in the sick-room, and he *must* work to drown reflection.

"Men must work, and women must weep," he said to himself as he took up his brush. "I thought the race of women who weep was extinct until I came here. Poor Helen, and poor Estella! How will it all end, I wonder?"

How, indeed? Could he only have foreseen! But that merciful veil that shrouds the future was down, and he went on blindfold to his fate.

Later, that day, Miss Mallory sent for her lawyer, and made her will. All went to Alwyn Bartram. Estella would have it so when she was consulted.

"Let it all be his, dear Aunt Helen," she said, hiding her happy face in the pillow—"let me owe everything to him. Oh, what is the wealth of the world in comparison to his love?"

And so the will was made, and signed, and sealed. The lawyer departed, taking it with him, and aunt and niece were alone in the Christmas twilight.

"And you are happy at last, my Essie?" the elder lady said, fondly caressing her beloved one's hand. "Thank Heaven for that!"

"Too happy for words to tell," Estella answered, almost with a sob. "I never thought he could care for me. It seems wicked and heartless to be happy now, but, oh! Aunt Helen, I love him so dearly—so dearly!"

"Thank Heaven!" Aunt Helen repeated; "be as happy as you can, my darling; shed no tears for me. Ab! my life has been loveless and lonely—I am not sorry to go. But, Essie, what of the past—your father—your—I mean Roysten Darrell? Shall we tell him all?"

"Whatever you please, Aunt Helen."

There was a pause.

"Then I think not," Helen Mallory said. "I shrink from repeating the troubles of your life, and I know how acutely sensitive he is. And why need he know? The Count de Montreuil is nothing to you—never need be now. He and Alwyn Bartram's wife may meet face to face in the future, and never know each other. Let him and his wealth go—that wealth which broke your poor mother's heart, and left her to die in misery and loneliness. And for Roysten Darrell, *he* is dead, and will never trouble you more. To Peter Fisher I will send a sum sufficient to satisfy him and silence him forever. Let by-gones be by-gones—Alwyn will be none the happier for knowing the miseries of your past life. If in the future you feel inclined to tell him yourself, do so; but my hours on earth are numbered. I want to pass them in peace—I can't go over the old ground. Unless he asks for your past life, we will bury it in oblivion."

"Whatever you like," Estella said, submissively; "you know best."

And so, with fatal sophistry, the past was hidden, and the story which, if told, might have saved them so many years of sorrow and parting was not told to Alwyn Bartram.

The days of that Christmas week went by, each one bringing the fatal end nearer and nearer. There was no time for love-making now; the awful presence of death filled every room in the house, darkened the very air. Helen Mallory was dying—they counted her life by hours now, not by days.

"You will marry Estella on New Year's-eve, Alwyn?" she said, wearily. "I am going with the old year. I can hardly hope for more than to see the new year dawn, and I *can not* die until my darling is your wife."

"Whenever you please, Helen," the young man answered, very gravely. "The sooner the better—since it *must* be," was his silent conclusion, with a groan.

Estella's preparations were few—there was no time, and less inclination, this mournful Christmas week. And yet she was happy, unutterably happy, though the aunt she loved lay dying. The stronger love conquered the weaker—her heart was full of inexpressible bliss, despite the terrible shadow of Death.

It came—New Year's-eve—Estella's wedding-day. Her second wedding-day—she remembered that with a sharp pang of terror and remorse.

"I wish Aunt Helen had told him," she thought. "What would he say if he knew of Roysten Darrell?"

The day dawned dull and leaden—no glimmer of sunshine in sky or earth. A wailing wind sobbed round the gables, and drove the snow in wild drifts before it.

As the afternoon wore on, the threatening rain began to fall, freezing as it fell, and lashing the windows in sleet and hail. A bad, black day, cold and tempestuous, dark and dreary. The dying woman shuddered as she listened to the raging of the storm.

"And I had hoped for sunshine and brightness on this last day," she thought, trying to shut out the eerie cries of the winter wind—"my darling's wedding-day. What if it should be ominous? What if it should be prophetic of the future, after all?"

She turned suddenly, and looked full at the bridegroom. He sat beside her, alone, looking very little like a bride-

groom, his dark face set, and stern, and smileless as the January sky without.

"Oh, Alwyn, tell me!" she cried, in shrill affright, "you *do* love Estella, do you not? You *will* cherish and protect her when I am gone?"

Alwyn Bartram's pale face turned a shade paler.

"If I can," he slowly said. "Truly and faithfully, Helen, I promise you to do my best to make her happy. Rest in peace; I will keep my marriage vow."

"She is so friendless, so utterly alone. Oh, my poor little Essie! She will have no one in the wide world but you. And she loves you, Alwyn; no one on this earth will ever love you as well."

No, surely not. To be twice loved so passionately, so unselfishly, rarely falls to the lot of one life-time.

Up in her room the bride was dressing for her second bridal—this bride of sixteen—with Norah standing by to assist." But the simple toilet was easily made, and the demands upon Norah were few. Very sullen and overcast looked the face of Helen Mallory's old servant. To her this hasty marriage was the maddest of all mad acts.

"He doesn't care for her," Norah said to herself. "Pretty as she is, and good as she is, he doesn't care for her. What, then, is he marrying her for?"

Very pretty Estella looked to-night—very pretty, very pale. Her gauzy robe floated pure and white around her; a pearl necklace encircled the slender throat; a white rose nestled among the brown curls—and that was all. No costly veil, no orange-blossoms, no train of bride-maids; and few brides ever looked fairer, sweeter, purer, on their bridal night.

"Will I do, Norah?"

She turned from the glass, a faint smile lighting her pale face—fair as a lily.

"You might do for a king, Miss Essie, let alone a penniless painter," Norah answered, brusquely. "You're a million times too good for that black-a-vised young man. Why you and Miss Helen come to set such store by him, I don't see. I never took to him and I never will. There!"

"Norah!" utter horror in face and eyes at this blasphemy.

"I don't care!" said Norah, folding her arms. "It's the truth, and I should burst if I didn't tell it. I don't

believe in this marriage, done up in a hurry, and I don't believe in *him*! There! it's after ten; if you're ready, come down."

She opened the door and flung out in a temper. On the landing stood the bridegroom waiting, pale as the bride herself.

"Is she ready?" he asked. "Miss Mallory grows impatient, and the clergyman is down-stairs."

Estella answered for herself. She came forward, her heart throbbing so fast and hard that she felt half suffocated. Scarcely looking at her, he drew her hand through his arm, and led her down.

"We must not excite her, and she is in a fever of impatience already," was all he said by the way.

In the sick-room, the doctor, the clergyman, the lawyer and Norah stood. The dying woman sat propped up with pillows, a feverish fire in her eyes. The room was dimly lighted by one shaded lamp, and the uproar of the storm sounded awfully loud without. A solemn scene and a solemn hour; a weird wedding at dead of night, in that raging tempest and by a death-bed.

The clergyman opened his book. Side by side they stood, those two—both deathly pale—both hearts full of awe unutterable, and Death stood in their midst. For the second time, Estella heard the mystic words of that solemn service. Once again in night and storm she was a bride.

It was over. She was Alwyn Bartram's wedded wife! With a great cry she flung herself upon the breast of the dying woman, and broke out into a passion of hysterical weeping. Helen Mallory strained her to her bosom in a wild grasp, the livid hue of death stealing over her face.

"This will never do," Dr. Sinclair said, decidedly. "If your niece can not restrain herself, Miss Mallory, she must leave the room."

But Helen only held her the closer.

"Never again!" she whispered, with a radiant smile. "Oh, my dearest, never again, until we part forever!"

They were almost her last words—the ebbing life was almost gone—dying truly with the old year. An awful hush fell upon them all. The moments wore on, the wind rose and fell, the sleet and hail beat against the glass, midnight drew near. With the first chime of the new year's bells the smile froze upon her face; with her head upon the bride's

breast, the gentle eyes closed, the new day and the new year that dawned upon Estella a bride dawned upon Helen Mallory a corpse.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DREARY HONEY-MOON.

IT was a very lengthy procession of carriages that followed Helen Mallory, three days later, to Mount Auburn.

She had died with few around her bedside. She had lived a lonely and secluded life, but all the old friends who had known her, and known her father and mother, assembled to see her laid in the grave.

Perhaps, too, curiosity had something to do with it. The news of the extraordinary marriage by her death-bed had circulated, and people wanted to see this romantically wedded bride and groom.

So the dull old house filled on the funeral day, and Mr. and Mrs. Alwyn Bartram were stared at to their hearts' content.

Mrs. Alwyn Bartram! Yes, she was that now—the one name of all others on earth she had most desired to bear!

Poor little lonely bride! Pitifully small, and pale, and thin she looked in her deep mourning, all her bright hair brushed away, her eyes dull and sunken with incessant weeping. She had never known how dearly she loved this indulgent relative—this gentle Aunt Helen—until she was lost forever.

And the girlish tears that would almost have been blissful had they fallen upon Alwyn Bartram's breast fell slowly and wretchedly upon that clay-cold bosom or Norah's faithful shoulder.

For Mr. Bartram was very busy, of course. All devolved upon him, and he went about those three days with a face of such dark gravity, not to say gloom, that his poor little bride quite trembled in the presence of her idol.

"Did he love Aunt Helen so much, or did he love me so little?" she thought, with a sharp pang of doubt and dread. "He looks so unhappy, and I am afraid to speak to him—I, who am his wife now, and who love him so dearly."

His wife! Oh, magic words! They thrilled through the hearts of this lovesick little girl like the music of heaven.

"He will think of me—he will love me—by and by," she thought, rapturously. "How can I expect him to love me as I love him—he so noble, so handsome, so talented, so far above me every way? And I am to pass my whole life by his side! My love, my darling, *my husband!*"

But these exalted fits would go, and moods of darkest despondency follow. Mr. Bartram wrapped himself in gloom as in a mantle, and, had he been anything less than a hero, might have been suspected of a tendency to sulkiness.

As it was, he grew in romantic Essie's eyes more like Conrad, the Corsair, every day, and she began to think Medora's life must have been one of the dreariest at times, sitting at her black-browed lord's feet, essaying in vain to win one fleeting smile.

The funeral day was dark and raw, with a piercing easterly wind, and a flutter of snowflakes in the leaden air.

Shivering in her crape and sables, Mrs. Alwyn Bartram leaned upon her husband's arm, crying wretchedly behind her veil, while the sods rattled down and the solemn words of the burial service sounded in her ears.

Dark and stern as doom her new-made husband stood beside her, his gloomy eyes fixed upon the grave—grown strangely worn and haggard since the memorable Christmas-eve.

It was all over—the carriages were rattling homeward through the chill, leaden dusk. He sat beside his bride, she still weeping incessantly, and not improving her pretty looks by the process.

Between the cold and the tears, Estella's nose was red and swollen, her bright eyes dim and sunken, her cheeks white to ghastliness. The sensitive eyes of the artist saw all this amid the trouble of greater things.

"And I thought her pretty!" the fancy flashed upon him through all his gloom. "Poor little babyish Essie! How they *will* criticise Alwyn Bartram's bread-and-butter bride in New York!"

And then, athwart the blackening gloaming, flashed the radiant face of lovely Leonie De Montreuil—that faultless face, that peerless form, those perfect manners.

Contrasts are good, but not such contrasts as these. He ground his teeth, and for the moment was base enough and

cruel enough to hate his unlucky little bride as well as himself.

"Fool that I was to sell myself to spite a cold-blooded jilt!" he thought—"to insure the misery of my own future life and that of this weak-witted girl!"

It was a very dreary drive. He made no attempt to dry the falling tears of his companion. She had the luxury of a long and wretched cry. No one could have despised him more thoroughly than he despised himself. In all wide America there were few more miserable men, this dull January evening, than Estella's husband.

He left his bride at home, and wended his way to the lawyer's office. Dark, and silent, and dreary as a tomb was Helen Mallory's old home—the silence of death reigning in every room.

Estella had cried until she could cry no longer. She toiled wearily up the long stairway now to her own room, and sunk down on her knees by the bedside, her poor, pale face hidden in the clothes.

"He does not love me," she thought, in dull despair. "He never loved me! Oh, why did he ask me to marry him? Why can I not die and leave him free?"

The night darkened down; she never stirred. She lay there, forlorn and miserable, not caring if she ever rose again. What was the world and all it contained, since the idol of her life was lost?

It was Norah who found her out, and tried to comfort her some hours after. He whose place was by her side was absorbed in other things, and it was the faithful arms of the old servant that drew her close to her heart.

"Don't cry for him, Miss Essie!" Norah said, in tones of concentrated scorn. "He isn't worth one tear. I always thought it; I'm sure of it now."

Estella lifted her head suddenly, and the brown eyes quite flashed.

"Hush, Norah! Not one word against him in my hearing. He is my husband, and I love him!"

Norah snorted disdainfully.

"Of course you do, and he's beginning to break your heart in time. Most men wait until the honey-moon is over to do that. Mr. Alwyn Bartram seems to be in a little more hurry than the rest. Oh," cried Norah, with a vi-

cious glare, "how I should like to tell him a piece of my mind!"

But strong-minded as Norah undoubtedly was, she was not strong-minded enough for that. When, a little later, Mr. Bartram strode in, looking tall, strong, black-browed and terrible, she shrunk away from him and descended to the kitchen, muttering *sotto voce*.

Few would have had the temerity to face the sullen lion just then. He made straight for the drawing-room, and found Estella there awaiting him.

What a pallid, helpless little shadow she looked in her trailing black robes! How mournfully the great brown eyes lifted themselves to his face in silent, piteous appeal!

That look touched even his heart—very hard, just now, in its great bitterness. He leaned moodily against the mantel and stared in the fire.

"Estella," he said, abruptly, "I am going to New York to-morrow."

There was no reply. The wistful eyes turned upon him again, but she looked afraid to speak.

"I shall leave you here with Norah for a few weeks," he went on, hurriedly. "I must take a house and furnish it before bringing you there. It is of no use my remaining here longer, and I don't fancy lodging you in a hotel. You can remain here quietly with Norah until I come for you."

"Yes."

She said it so faintly so sadly, that he hardly heard it. He looked up, but she had shrunk suddenly back, and sat holding a hand-screen before her face.

"You do not mind, do you, Essie? You would rather be here with Norah for a few weeks than lonely in a great New York hotel? I should necessarily have to leave you very much alone—house-hunting and furniture-hunting. You would find it horribly dreary there, by yourself, among strangers. You would rather remain here, would you not?"

"Whatever you please."

Again so faintly that he barely heard it. Her heart was full, her voice was choked, but the fanciful little screen hid the poor, pale face.

There was a pause.

"Do you know, Estella," he said at last, "that Helen Mallory has left her whole fortune to me?"

"Yes, I know."

"It should not have been so; I was both surprised and sorry. It should have been yours—your separate, independent estate. However, it will make no difference—it need make none; my interests and yours are one now. And, Estella, of course, as you know nothing of housekeeping, I must engage some competent person to take all that trouble off your shoulders. I know a lady in New York—Mrs. Hamilton; she will accept the situation, I think. And Norah—what of her? Does she go with us?"

"I think not."

"Ah, well! it doesn't matter. Mrs. Hamilton is quite competent." He drew out his watch. "Half past eight. Have you had supper?"

"No—I could not eat."

"No more can I. Well, you had better ring for Norah to keep you company this first evening alone. Poor Helen! I am going to my room to pack up, and after, I have letters to write. It will probably be daylight before I get through. As I leave here at seven, it is not worth my while to retire. You can tell Norah my plans, and be ready to accompany me to New York when I return for you in two or three weeks. Mr. Garl, the lawyer, will supply you with whatever money you may want, meantime. And as you will probably be asleep when I leave in the morning, I had better say good-bye now. Don't distress yourself, Essie, and don't be lonely; the days will soon pass. Good-night and good-bye!"

He stooped and kissed her cheek as she sat—such a cold, careless kiss—and then he was gone.

Gone! and Estella was left alone, this first night after the burial of her kind friend—alone in the silent and dreary house.

She slipped out of her chair, down on her knees, her face hidden in her hands.

"Why did he marry me? why did he marry me?" she thought. "Oh, Aunt Helen!—dearest, kindest auntie that ever lived in this world—he does not love me; he *never* will love me! He goes and leaves me alone already!"

Estella did not summon Norah. For hours she lay there alone with her sorrow. Of all the troubles of the

past, there had never been any to go to her heart like this. She loved this man with all her passionate, impulsive soul, and now that he was hers—her husband—he was further off, more utterly lost, than ever.

She arose at last—it was very late, and growing cold—and staggered upstairs to her room. She had to pass his on her way, and involuntarily her footsteps stopped, and her heart seemed to pause in its beating.

She could see the shining of the light beneath the door; she could hear him moving to and fro, gathering together his belongings for departure. He needed no help of *hers*. She turned suddenly away, and passed into her own room.

Mr. Bartram departed very early next morning, without waiting to see any one. But hidden behind the curtains, his wife of a week watched him out of sight, with straining, yearning, impassioned brown eyes.

The wheels that bore him from her seemed crushing over her heart—she sat down on the bedside, pale and breathless when their last roll was heard, her hand pressed hard over her breast, as though to still the intolerable pain there.

"Will I ever see him again?" she thought, drearily. "Has he gone forever, and left me here to drag out my weary life? Will he really—really come back, as he said? and, oh, if *this* be my honey-moon, what is my whole wedded life likely to be?"

She had not slept all night—she was too heartsick and wretched to sleep now. She dressed herself with listless indifference, and descended to breakfast, with cheeks whiter than the new year's snow piled high outside, and hollow, lack-luster eyes.

Norah looked at her with indignant face.

"I thought so! You've gone and kept awake all night, Miss Essie, fidgeting and worrying yourself and other people into their graves. You look like your own ghost this morning!"

"Do I?" with a tired sigh. "What does it matter, Norah, how I look? There's no one to care."

"Isn't there? *I'm* no one, I suppose, and you're no one yourself; but the man that's married you, *he's* somebody, surely, and he cares. Why doesn't he come down to breakfast?"

"Because he has gone."

"Gone! Gone where?"

"Back to New York."

Her eyes filled as she said it. She turned away, but not until she caught the indignant red mounting to Norah's brow.

"Gone back to New York, and left you here—his bride! What do you mean, Miss Essie?"

"Don't blame him, Norah—don't be angry—he could not help it. He wishes to take a house and furnish it, before bringing me on, and he thought I would prefer remaining here with you to being alone in a hotel. So I would, too"—the last words by a brave effort; "and he wishes to engage a housekeeper, and all that. He is very good and thoughtful, Norah, and he knows best; and you mustn't—you mustn't be angry with him if you love me."

She threw her arms round grim Norah's neck, and kissed her coaxingly. And Norah, by a mighty effort, swallowed her just wrath, kissed back, and began busying herself among the breakfast things.

"And when is he coming back, pray?" she inquired at length, when she had sufficiently mastered her feelings.

"In a few weeks—as soon as ever he can. I am to be all ready to accompany him; and you, too, Norah, if you will go."

"Thank you very much, Miss Essie! but I have my own plans, and mean to stick to 'em. I'll go with no man; I wouldn't trust one of them as far as I could see him. When you go, I shall leave this place and set up a little business for myself. I will have a house of my own, and be master and mistress all my life, and if ever you get tired of New York, or your handsome husband or his fine friends, come to me, and you will always be sure of a welcome and shelter; and that day will come before long," muttered Norah, prophetically, as she flounced out of the room.

The days went very slowly at Chelsea. Estella wisely kept busy, preparing her wardrobe, packing her pet books and pictures, practicing assiduously, studying hard, and doing her best, poor child, to stave off thought.

But the January days dragged dismally their slow length along. Mr. Bartram had written once—a brief note—saying he had arrived safely, and had taken a house, and engaged a housekeeper. It was very brief and scant, begin-

ning "My Dear Estella," and ending "Very affectionately yours"—very scant and business-like, and Estella's heart sunk as she read it.

"If he had only once called me his wife!" she murmured, sadly. "But he wants to forget that, if he can. Ah, if I were only beautiful, and talented, and accomplished, how I would try to compel him to love me! But little, and ignorant, and plain, and silent, as I am, what is the use?"

January passed—February came. Estella's honey-moon was over. She moved about, the pallid shadow of herself—thin, colorless, fair and frail as a spirit.

She never complained; she rarely spoke of him now. But in her heart there was but one thought, in her dreams one image.

The sweet, young face took a more patient tenderness—the soft, brown eyes a sadder beauty than of old.

And sitting, playing softly to herself in the lonely winter gloamings, her heart chanted unconsciously poor *Mari-an-a's mournful refrain:*

"She only said, 'My life is dreary.
He cometh not,' she said.
She sighed, 'I am aweary, aweary;
I would that I were dead!'"

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. RUTHERFORD REPENTS.

THE theater was crowded; the play was "Hamlet;" the star of the evening Edwin Booth. Everybody was there and diamonds flashed, and bright eyes outshone them, and fans fluttered, and perfumes filled the air, and *Vanity Fair* mustered strong to do honor to the melancholy Prince of Denmark.

The first act was half over, when a sensation ran through one part of the house—that part nearest the stage.

A little group—two ladies and a gentleman—entered their box, and a fire of lorgnettes was instantly leveled in that direction. It was Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford, and their friend Mrs. Manners.

"The little Rutherford is radiant as the goddess Hebe," one of the group of fashionably got-up young men observed, with a drawl. "She outdoes herself to-night."

"Matrimony, and Rutherford's bank-checks agree with her," a second said, with a shrug. "She reigns *en princesse* in the millionaire's up-town palace. By Jove! she is beautiful, though. There is nothing like her in the house."

"I saw Bartram this afternoon," observed a third, "and remarkably well I thought the beggar looking. He's recovered, I fancy. Men have died and worms have eaten them, you know, 'but not for love.'"

"He was badly hipped, though. I saw him the wedding-morning, half hidden behind a pillar, glowering like grim death. It reminded one of those Venetian pictures, all pillars, and gondolas, and curtains out of doors, with two lovers billing and cooing in the foreground, and a bravo in the rear, with cloak, and dagger, and cocked hat. But we don't do that sort of thing nowadays; we don't break our hearts for little dots of things like Leonie, nor drive our stiletto into the lucky man's ribs. Bartram's got over it like better men, and the next thing you hear, he'll be marrying a fortune—Blanche White, for instance, the richest girl in New York, and an old worshiper at his shrine."

"How grandly the Parisian princess ignores her *bourgeois* husband!" the first speaker said, still staring hard at the Rutherford box. "She wears his diamonds, and drives his high-stepping ponies, and graces the head of his table, and snubs him incontinently. Let's go round and pay our respects."

The curtain fell. The three young men arose, and made their way to where the beauty of the night sat.

Radiantly lovely looked Leonie in flashing silk and diamonds, her black eyes like stars, her exquisite face wreathed in its most brilliant smile, as she chattered with Mrs. Manners.

She turned the glorious light of those Assyrian orbs in a flashing glance of welcome upon the three gentlemen sauntering in, and old Rutherford, with a portentous frown on his rugged brow, retreated before their advance.

"Scented, conceited, young puppies!" he thought. "They see how she treats me, and they take the advantage. Look how she smiles upon them, and I—I am no more to her than the dirt under her feet!"

"I thought you were out of town, monsieur," Leonie

said, leaning back, and looking brightly up in the face of the gentleman bending over her. "When did you return?"

"Last night. 'Through pleasures and palaces though we may roam,' we are sure eventually to return to New York. By the bye, another friend of yours has returned, Mrs. Rutherford. Look there!"

He waved his glass. Leonie raised her own jeweled lorgnette, and saw, sitting in the box directly opposite, her rejected lover, Alwyn Bartram. By his side sat a tall and stately blonde—a handsome girl, and exquisitely dressed, whose brightest smiles seemed all for him.

"Handsome couple, eh? Dark and fair—he, swart as a Spaniard; she, fair as a lily. 'We always return to our first loves,' saith the French proverb, and in this case it is confirmed. The handsome Blanche was Bartram's earliest adoration, before"—with a sidelong look and bow—"a more brilliant star arose to eclipse her."

Mrs. Rutherford dropped her glass with a laugh. But her companion saw a sudden light in her eyes, a sudden compression of the small mouth.

"Don't trouble yourself to pay compliments *now*, Mr. Waldron—the time is past. Mr. Bartram, like yourself, has been out of town, then?"

"Lost somewhere in the wilds of Massachusetts," her companion answered, coolly, "where an ancient aunt or a fairy godmother, or something of that kind, has died recently and left him a fortune. He wears mourning, you perceive. There was another rumor afloat about his having wooed and won a Boston heiress, but that is hardly likely, is it? It doesn't look like it; and besides, he could hardly go so fast, even in this rapid age."

"Not in the least likely," Mrs. Rutherford said, coldly. "I scarcely credit the other story, either—about the mythical fortune. Men don't lose one, and gain another, all in a week or two. Mr. Bartram has friends in Massachusetts—he has been in the habit of visiting them ever since I knew him."

"How well Alwyn is looking!" Mrs. Manners whispered, maliciously. "Do you see him, Leonie dear? Ah! he and Blanche condescend to see us, and bow. How radiantly she smiles upon him—how triumphant she looks! There must have been something in the old story, after all, then—

And he—upon my word, dear, he grows handsomer than ever."

Leonie Rutherford ground her little white teeth. Her eyes rested on her husband—fat, fifty, vulgar and sulky—then went back to the man she loved. Yes, loved—a wedding-ring and the name of Rutherford could not obliterate that old passion. She loved him, now that of her own free will she had jilted him, a thousand times better than ever. She had always been more or less jealous of the stately blonde, Blanche, and now to see him sitting by her side, listening to her lowest word, the recipient of her brightest smiles, stung her to the quick.

"And she is an heiress," Leonie thought, with a flashing glance of hatred at her rival, "and is ready to marry him to-morrow, if he asks her. And I love him, and he knows it! I have all I sold myself for—the glory of the world—but is the game worth the candle, after all?"

The play went on, and the play within the play. Mr. Bartram, when Mrs. Rutherford was pointed out to him by his fair companion, had bowed across with infinite grace and calm, and then went on talking, with one single alteration of face.

"Do men change so easily?" Blanche White thought; "or did he really love that little black-eyed doll?"

"How beautiful Mrs. Rutherford is looking to-night!" she said, aloud. "Her best, I think."

"Mrs. Rutherford makes a point of *always* looking her best, does she not?" he answered, coolly; "and, as usual, surrounded by adorers."

"While that poor old man scowls in the background," laughed Blanche. "If he were not quite so fat, and quite so red-faced, it would be really tragical. They say he is furiously jealous already, but then old men always are."

"And Madame Leonie seems determined he shall have substantial cause. How Waldron suns himself in those tropical smiles! But see, the curtain ascends, and, after all—with reverence be it spoken—Booth is better worth watching just now than even the brilliant Leonie."

"Ah! is he? Then Mr. Bartram's opinions have undergone a change of late," the young lady could not help saying.

Mr. Bartram ran his fingers through his waving hair with the sang froid of a prince.

"Rather—in many respects. It is the nature of the animal—man—to change and grow wiser; I have done both."

He turned quietly to the stage, and never once during the remainder of the evening did his fair companion catch his eye wandering to that opposite box.

He was completely absorbed by herself as though no other woman existed in the scheme of the universe. And the cheeks of the heiress flushed with pleasure, and her blue eyes shot triumphant glances at the dark fairy across the way.

When all was over, and he drew her arm within his own to lead her to her carriage her heart beat high with hope.

"He was mine until Leonie De Montreuil appeared," she thought. "He shall be mine again, and that before long."

The two streams, descending opposite stairways, met face to face in the vestibule. Mr. Bartram, looking up from adjusting Miss White's cloak with solicitous attention, met full the great black eyes of Leonie—his lost love. At the same instant Mrs. Manners gayly extended her hand.

"Truant," she said, "we have not seen you for an age. Where have you been hiding yourself? Leonie, my dear," without waiting for a reply, "don't you see our old friend, Mr. Bartram?"

"Yes, I see him," Leonie answered, quietly, holding out her tiny gloved hand, "and am happy to welcome him back to New York."

Mr. Bartram bowed to both ladies, with a face of changeless color.

"And I am happy to find an opportunity so soon to offer my congratulations! I wish you every happiness, Mrs. Rutherford. Miss Blanche, the crowd is dispersing. I think we can find our carriage now."

He led her away, but not until Leonie's cavalier, Mr. Waldron, caught her passionate, yearning glance.

"So," he thought, "sits the wind in that quarter! And they used to say she had no heart! By Jove! I wouldn't stand in poor Rutherford's shoes for all his thousands."

"Hurry!" Leonie said, with a sudden shiver. "Take us out of this, for pity's sake! I am cold."

And so the several lovers had met and parted again, and even the jealous husband, watching with angry old eyes, saw nothing in the meeting to stir up his ire. But beneath!

Alwyn Bartram went to his hotel that night—his old, luxurious rooms—and paced up and down those gilded apartments for hours, with flashing eyes and clinched teeth, and a heart full of maddening pain.

He had much better have gone to bed and to sleep than worn out his boots and the carpet in that high-tragedy style; but a “haunting shape, an image gay,” danced deliriously before him, and drove him nearly wild with jealous rage.

“How beautiful she looked! How brightly she smiled the old, enchanting, irresistible smile! Witch, sorceress, siren! heartless, bloodless flirt! Such women are only born to be the curse of man!”

There was not one thought of the poor, little, pale girl he had married in his heart. It was Leonie’s image—peerless Leonie—hers alone that haunted him into the small hours, and followed him even into his feverish morning dreams.

Mrs. Rutherford drove quietly home beside her husband. But she shrunk away into the furthest corner, shivering in her ermine wraps, with black eyes that glowed like live stars in the dusk.

Mr. Rutherford sulky as he was (and sulkiness had been his normal state since his wedding-day), essayed a commonplace or two, but was put down at once by an outbreak of passionate impatience:

“For pity’s sake, Mr. Rutherford, let me alone! I’m tired to death, and as sleepy as I can be. Don’t torment me with questions!”

“You were wide enough awake ten minutes ago,” the crushed worm ventured to retort, “and found answers enough for that puppy Waldron. It is only when your husband talks to you, Mrs. Rutherford, that you are too tired and sleepy to reply.”

“When my husband finds anything half as interesting to say as Mr. Waldron, I may possibly answer him, too,” the lady responded, frigidly. “Meanwhile, be good enough to let me alone.”

Mrs. Rutherford’s maid found her mistress unusually

fractious and ill-tempered this particular night, and all the while she sat under Mlle Aglae's hands, the low, dark brow was knitted with an expression of intolerable pain. Mrs. Rutherford was repenting, and repentance came too late.

When her maid left her, all draped in her loose white robe, her rich black hair unbound, she covered that wicked, beautiful face of hers with both ringed hands, while slow, passionate, wretched tears dropped through the slender fingers.

"Oh, fool, fool, fool that I have been!" she thought, bitterly. "Miserable, inconsistent fool! for loving him as I do, as I ever must do, I yet would act as I have acted, were the past mine again to-morrow. Wealth and luxury are as essential to me as the air I breathe. Were I his wife this moment, and he poor, in spite of all my love I would be miserable."

She arose, and walked slowly up and down the exquisite dressing-room, a picture of beauty in itself.

"How well he looked! Handsome as a demi-god, and all devotion to the insipid Blanche. Will he do as I have done—marry her, I wonder? At least he need never be ashamed of his wife, as I am of that horribly odious old man. Has he forgotten me so soon? Has the old passionate love quite died out? Has he nothing left for Leonie, the false, but scorn and contempt? I will know," she said, inwardly, setting her teeth. "We will meet in society. From his own lips I will hear what he thinks, and after—'after that the deluge.'"

Mrs. Rutherford went to bed, and slept the sleep of the just, and Mr. Rutherford, the millionaire, might have gone for sympathy to Alwyn Bartram's wife, for his image, in his spouse's dreams, sleeping and waking, was quite as totally ignored.

But Mrs. Rutherford had made one little mistake—she did not meet her old lover in society. Business had brought Mr. Bartram to New York, and he devoted himself to business and the company of his bachelor friends, and Vanity Fair saw very little of him. His mourning was one excuse; but then he was house-hunting, and had engaged a housekeeper, and these facts leaked out in spite of his grim taciturnity. He was married, had a mysterious wife hidden away in Boston, and the rumor spread and

gained ground every day. It reached the ears of Leonie Rutherford, and was the last drop added to her already overflowing cup of repentant bitterness. In vain she had dressed exquisitely and looked beautiful and gone everywhere in hope of meeting him. He was not to be met; and driven to desperation, Mrs. Rutherford was guilty of the maddest act of her life. She wrote to Mr. Bartram a note:

"I want to see you. You have letters and pictures of mine—I of yours. Will you come to-morrow evening at eight, and fetch them with you. I shall be quite alone."

There was neither date nor signature to this rash epistle. It needed none. Mr. Bartram would have known that thick, slippery French paper, with its fanciful silver monogram—that unfaltering, spidery Italian tracery—the wide world over.

He was alone in his room when it came, and his face flushed dark red, and his large, deep eyes glowed like coals of fire as he read. His triumph had come.

"She takes the initiative," he thought, with that sardonic smile of fierce exultation. "Women never learn to wait. You want to weave your old chains, my beautiful Leonie—to enslave your old bondman once more; and I am to hold out my imbecile hands for the flowery fitters. You can't meet me in society, so you step a little out of your patrician way, and face me on my own ground. The sulky mountain won't come to Mohammed, so pretty Mohammed comes to the mountain. You have heard your slave has broken his chains and got married to an heiress, and you can't believe it, and you want to learn the truth from headquarters. Very well, my dear Mrs. Rutherford, you shall. I will keep your appointment. I will be with you to-morrow night."

Just ten minutes later than the hour named, Mr. Alwyn Bartram rang the door-bell of that stately Fifth Avenue mansion, and was admitted at once by the well-trained lackey into the sumptuous drawing-room. Very sumptuous, indeed; almost barbaric in its splendor of gilding, of painting and color, and a fitting chamber for the lovely little lady who sat alone in its vast grandeur. She arose and came forward, looking like the Queen of the Fairies, in a robe that seemed woven of spun sunbeams, and with

diamond stars blazing in her dead-black hair. Had she dressed like this for him? No; Mrs. Rutherford was robed for a ball, and waiting had flushed her dark cheeks and kindled a streaming fire in her glorious eyes. She was more than beautiful—she was dazzling; but if Alwyn Bartram was dazzled, his fixed and resolute face hid it well. She held out her hand with a long, wistful, imploring look up in his eyes; but he just touched it with his cold fingers, and let it fall.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting, Mrs. Rutherford," he said, speaking first. "Eight was the hour, I believe. I must beg your pardon for not returning you property sooner, but really I have been so occupied of late that it quite slipped my memory. I think you will find everything correct here"—he laid a little parcel on the table—"and I hope you will not feel it inconvenient to let me have mine."

She looked at him with eyes that flashed. Every cold word had stung her vanity to the quick.

"It is quite convenient, Mr. Bartram. I have them ready." She swept down the room and lifted a tiny package off the piano. "They should have been restored long since, could I but have met you. You have turned hermit, I believe, and never go out now?"

"By no means, Mrs. Rutherford. I go out a great deal. But house-hunting is quite a new line of business to me; and house-hunting in this city in the month of January is rather a formidable process. Besides, I have lost a friend quite recently, as you may have heard."

"Ah! Your uncle?"

"No; Miss Helen Mallory of Boston—a very old and very dear friend indeed."

"And gained a fortune, have you not?" Mrs. Rutherford asked, carelessly. "Rumor says so, at least."

"Rumor is quite correct in this instance. Yes, Miss Mallory left me all she possessed. No princely inheritance—a mere pittance, I dare say, when compared with Mr. Rutherford's countless thousands. But then I am not ambitious, and it will suffice very well for the humble tastes of myself and—my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Most certainly! Have you not heard I am married, Mrs. Rutherford? Surprising! I fancied every one knew

it by this time. The affair was arranged on the quiet—my wife was the late Miss Mallory's ward; but I thought it was tolerably well-known by now. You see, the excellent example of my friends, Mrs. Rutherford, is not altogether thrown away upon me, after all. Thanks for the letters; we will make a bonfire of our old folly. Permit me to bid you good-evening—I perceive you are going out."

She never spoke. Her face had turned of a dead waxen whiteness, from brow to chin; her great dark eyes had slowly dilated while he talked. She loved him—every feature in that colorless face told that. The jilted lover's triumph was complete.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Rutherford!" he repeated, his powerful eyes meeting hers full. "I trust you will enjoy yourself at the ball."

There was no answer; the shock had been too great. With a smile upon his face, Alwyn Bartram ran down the marble steps, and out under the January stars.

Two hours later, Mrs. Rutherford made her entrance into the crowded ball-room, more beautiful, more elegant, more brilliant than ever. She outshone herself to-night. She laughed, she talked, she flirted, as even she had never done before.

"And Alwyn Bartram is really married," she said, laughingly, as she hung upon Mr. Waldron's arm. "Lucky fellow—and to a Boston heiress! But she—poor thing—don't you fancy her honey-moon must be rather of the dreariest, spent alone? I shall certainly call upon her, as soon as she arrives. I am dying of curiosity! She ought to be pretty—Alwyn Bartram's wife."

CHAPTER XX.

MRS. BARTRAM ENTERS SOCIETY.

THE January snows had melted, and the ides of February had come and nearly gone. The shrill winds whistled drearily up and down the dull streets of quiet Chelsea, and the tall poplars stood grim and stripped, and rattled their dead arms in the cold blast. And Estella Mallory—nay, Estella Bartram—had sat, day after day, and night after night, alone, and watched the eerie prospect with hopelessly sorrowful eyes.

"Will he never come?" she thought. "Has he gone and left me forever? Oh, if he would but write!"

For Mr. Bartram, absorbed in his various occupations, had found time to write but that first brief note to his neglected little bride.

He had no intention of being deliberately unkind to her; he only overlooked her. His feelings were all negative where Estella was concerned.

"And, besides, it is not worth while writing," he said, to himself, "since I will go for her so shortly now; and we really have nothing to say to each other."

Mr. Bartram's "shortly" resolved itself into the close of February. It was very near the last of the month, when, one chill, starlight evening, he walked up the old familiar street, and rung the bell of the silent house.

How hopelessly stagnant and still everything was! How dark and dreary the whole front of the house!

"Poor little girl!" he thought, with a twinge of compunction; "it is like being shut in a prison. I am sorry I left her so long alone."

Norah opened the door, and stared stonily at the young man, no smile of welcome or recognition on her grim face.

But Mr. Bartram stepped in at once, as into his own house, with a cool nod.

"How are you, Norah? And how is Estella? Where shall I find her?"

"Your wife is in the drawing-room, Mr. Bartram," Norah said, in a voice as acid as her face. "She ain't expectin' you. If you don't take care, she'll think you a ghost."

Mr. Bartram did not wait; he was springing lightly up the stairs.

The drawing-room door was ajar, and, faint, and sweet, he could hear Estella singing in the gloaming. Only the flickering fire-light filled the room, and the light of the solemn stars glimmered through the undrawn curtains.

The little black figure at the piano looked only a darker shadow among the shadows, and her mournful old song sounded sadly as the last cadence of a funereal hymn:

"On the banks of Allan water,
When brown Autumn spreads its store,
Still was seen the miller's daughter,
But she smiled no more.

For the summer grief had brought her,
And the soldier false was he;
On the banks of Allan water
None so sad as she."

Her voice, faltering throughout, died away altogether, and her face fell forward in her hands, with a sob.

Alwyn Bartram, standing in the door-way, never forgot that firelit scene—never forgot that pang of sharp remorse with which that shuddering sob fell upon his ears.

"I promised Helen Mallory to love and cherish her," he thought; "and see how I keep my word."

He started forward. At the sound of his footsteps, she sprung to her feet—doubt, recognition, delight, in every feature. She stood still, incapable of sound or speech.

"My poor little Essie!" He took her in his arms, with a sudden pity that was near akin to love. "My dear little girl! my little wife! I have come at last!"

"At last!"—her head fell forward on his shoulder, with an hysterical sob—"at last! Oh, Alwyn, I thought you would never come again!"

"What! thought so badly of me as that?" the young man answered, with a very conscience-stricken laugh; "thought I had deserted my pretty bride in the heart of the honey-moon? No, no! Essie, our parting is over; I have come to carry you off from dull Chelsea, as the prince carries off the Sleeping Beauty in your pet Tennyson's poem. Come, let me look at you—lift your face, Essie, and let me look at my wife!"

He raised it up—oh, such an inexpressibly happy face now—and smiled down in the radiant brown eyes, full of golden glitter.

"My pretty, pale bride! my girl with the golden eyes! where have your red cheeks gone to? You are as pale and wan as a spirit—more like Undine than ever. By the bye, Essie, the 'Undine' is finished and sent in; we will see what the connoisseurs say *this* time. And now, have you dined? Because I have not, and, to tell the truth, I feel hungry."

"Dinner will be ready directly," Estella answered, brightly. "We have had ours—Norah and I. Norah always insists upon dinner, whether one feels like dining or not."

"And Norah is very right. Nothing is more conducive

to low spirits, and melancholy generally, than short commons. Is my room ready? I'll run up and change my dress; and do you find an appetite, meantime, Mrs. Bartram, because eating alone I don't admire."

"Your room is always ready," Estella said. Then, with a sudden impulse, she clasped both her hands around his arm, and looked up in her demi-god's face, with shining, wonderful eyes. "Oh, Alwyn, I am so glad—so glad—*so* glad you have come!"

"My dear little Essie, was it so lonely here?"

"Oh, so lonely—so long! And I may go with you, Alwyn—really, really go? and you will never leave me again?"

"Never again, you foolish, fond little wife—never again! If I had known you would have missed me so much, I would have taken you with me when I went. I thought you would have been quite contented with Norah, and your piano, and your books."

She looked at him wistfully, then turned away. He could not understand her, and she had no words to say what was in her full heart that throbbed for him under that black bodice.

"I will be down in half an hour. Tell Norah I am particularly sharp set, and not to allow the kitchen to grow verdant under her airy tread."

He kissed her and left the room. And when he left her, Estella stood, with a face more luminous than a sunlit summer sky. Her idol was back—hers forever—talking to her, and caressing her, *almost* as if he loved her.

"Oh, my darling!" she whispered, thrilling all over with ecstasy; "I am the happiest creature on earth tonight!"

"Does that young man want anything to eat, Miss Essie?" demanded a gruff voice. "Because if he does, it's time I had my orders."

It was Norah, standing in the door-way, and gazing with cynical contempt at the girl's radiant countenance.

Mrs. Bartram came down to earth with a sudden jerk.

"Is it you, Norah? Oh, yes! I was just going to tell you. Mr. Bartram has not dined, and is particularly hungry after his journey; so, Norah dear, get him something nice. He will be down in half an hour."

"Ah," said Norah, with a sort of groan, "I dare say he

will. Men can forget everything on the earth—their wives among the rest—but catch one of 'em forgetting his victuals! He must put up with broiled beefsteak and cold apple-tart, Miss Essie; and if he don't like that, why there's the restaurant round the corner. Let him go there."

"Oh, Norah," reproachfully, "send him there? No, no! You broil the steak and fry the potatoes and I will set the table, and get out the silver and glass, and marmalade, and preserved peaches. He likes nice things, you know; and oh, Norah! Norah!" flinging her arms impetuously around her neck, "I am so happy—so happy, now that he has come!"

"Greater fool you, then! I never felt more like slamming the door in any one's face than I did in his, this very evening. It's no wonder men are what they are; you girls spoil them, and get your hearts broke for your pains. I wish I had my way; I'd soon take the conceit out of 'em. There! that's hugging enough; go and hug Mr. Alwyn Bartram, and I'll cook the meat and potatoes."

Norah flounced away in a pet, and happy Estella ran to the dining-room to light the gas, and spread the cloth, and get out the silver, and glass and china, for her lord and king. And when that was done she flew up to her chamber, to brush out the bright ringlets, and don her best dress and jet ornaments.

"If I only were pretty," she thought, gazing with wistful eyes at her thin, wan face, "I think he would learn to love me *now!* If I only looked like that lovely lady whose picture he showed me once, whom he loved then! Where is she, I wonder—dead or false? Could any one in the world be false to him?"

Mr. and Mrs. Bartram dined sociably *tête-à-tête* for the first time, and Mr. Bartram was dangerously, fatally kind. He was not the least in the world in love with his pale girl-wife; but he felt tenderly, protectingly toward her, as he might toward some poor, little, wounded bird, that had flown to his breast for shelter.

He was very kind, very communicative. He told her all his plans for the future—how hard he was to work, how famous he was to grow, what pleasure he would feel in exhibiting to her all the undreamed of wonders of life in gay New York. He told her of their future home, and of her housekeeper and companion, Mrs. Hamilton.

"For she will be more a companion to you, Essie, than an ordinary housekeeper," he said; "and of course she is to be treated as one of the family. They moved in the best society once—the Hamiltons—and Mrs. H——'s manners are perfect. Any little thing connected with etiquette, Essie, which you do not know," Mr. Bartram added, with some hesitation, "she will teach you; and, of course, as you have never been in society, there are many things and observances of which you must necessarily be ignorant. However, your mourning will prevent your going out much for the next six months, at least, and during that time you will continue taking lessons under the most capable masters. In our Darby and Joan life we will have time to get acquainted, and when Alwyn Bartram presents his friends to his wife, he wants to be proud as well as fond of her."

Estella's face glowed! Would that blissful day ever come—the day on which he would be proud of her?

"Oh!" she thought, "how hard I will study, how much I will try to improve, how patient I will be with triplets and cinquepaced passages and nasty French verbs, and history and things, to become worthy of him!"

Mr. Bartram remained but little over a week in Chelsea, and then the house was left in charge of Norah. It was to be rented as it stood, and when a tenant was found, Norah was to vacate. Estella's husband had invited her to accompany them—not very cordially, however—and Norah had flatly declined.

"As I told Miss Essie, I never ran after any man's heels yet, and I am not going to begin now. You can both go, and I wish you well, and I hope you'll make the poor child happy, I'm sure; but I'll stay in Chelsea, Mr. Bartram, and take care of myself."

She assisted her young mistress to pack, with a stony face that told little whether or no she were sorry for their speedy parting; but, at the last, she took her in her strong arms with a powerful clasp.

"You're going away with your husband, child, and one hair of his head is dearer to you than poor Norah, body and soul. You're going to your new home, and your new life, and your fine new friends, and you will forget me, very likely; but, if the day ever comes"—she paused, and her hard, gray eyes looked ominously prophetic—"if the day ever comes, Essie, when the new love, and the new life, and

fine friends fail, then come back to Chelsea—come back to Norah, who will love you and pray for you always, and give you a warm welcome and the shelter of her roof however humble it may be."

Estella looked up reproachfull through her tears.

"That day will never come, Norah. Have I not my husband? That day will never come, but I will not forget you. I will write to you often, and come to see you next summer—may I? And you will answer my letters, will you not?"

"I will answer all you will ever write. Now run, my dear; your husband looks impatient to start. Good-bye, and God forever bless you!"

Mr. and Mrs. Bartram departed, and the journey to New York was delightful. All that the most devoted husband could be, Alwyn Bartram was, and shy little Essie hung upon his arm, and dared look up in his handsome face with adoring brown eyes, and chat with him *almost* as though she were his equal.

How different it was from that other terrible journey to Chelsea, when she had run away from Fisher's Folly and Roysten Darrell! She shuddered as she thought of it, and the impulse came strongly over her to tell him all then. If she only had! But she looked up in his face and saw that tell-tale countenance growing somber under the sudden recollection of Leonie, and her faltering courage failed.

"Not now," she thought; "he *might* be angry that I did not tell him sooner; and I think one angry look from him would kill me. By and by, some evening in the twilight, I will sit at his feet and tell him the whole story of the cruel, bitter past. And he *may* be pleased when he hears I am the daughter of a French nobleman, and not the nameless, fatherless girl he thinks me."

The lately-wedded pair reached New York early in the chill March morning, and drove through the windy streets in a hackney carriage.

It seemed a very long drive to Estella, and New York looked particularly dingy and dismal in the leaden morning light. The up-town streets seemed as forlorn and deserted as even Chelsea, and the rows of brown-stone houses, all as much alike as peas in a pod, bewildered her unaccustomed eyes.

"How can people tell their own when they come to it?"

she wondered. "This city may be a very gay and brilliant place: but if so, it doesn't do itself justice now."

The hack stopped before one of the brown-stone mansions, and Mr. Bartram helped her out, and rang a peal that speedily brought a sleepy housemaid to the door.

At the same instant, a tall and stout, and stately lady, "fair, fat, and fifty," at least, opened the drawing-room door, and came forward to welcome the master of the house. She had resolute black eyes and a double chin, and a magnificent manner that made poor little Essie, at first sight, tremble in her gaiters.

"I am happy to welcome you home, Mr. Bartram," said this gorgeous dame, extending one fat, ringed hand—"all the happier because you arrive sooner than I dared expect. And—*Mrs. Bartram, I presume?*"

"Yes—my wife. Estella, my dear, our friend, Mrs. Hamilton."

Mrs. Hamilton courtesied, gave the ringed, fat hand to Estella, with a gracious smile, pouring a flood of welcome and congratulation into her bewildered ears.

"How tired you must be, and how cold, my dear Mrs. Bartram! Ah! I know what weary work traveling is. But you will find your apartments in order and your maid awaiting you, and breakfast—But what time do you desire breakfast, Mr. Bartram?"

"Immediately—as soon as it can be got ready. I'll answer for traveling being hungry business whatever else it may be. Estella, my dear, this way. Let me have the pleasure of conducting Mrs. Bartram to her rooms."

He gave her his arm; she looked tired and pale, and a little frightened.

Mrs. Hamilton gazed after her, with the fat hands folded.

"Such a little thing!" she thought—"such a little, childish thing! Pale, hollow-eyed, sunken-cheeked, unformed! And after *Leonie De Montreuil!* No manner—frightened of *me!* Not a word to say for herself. And *that* is Alwyn Bartram's wife! Well, *I* will be mistress here, not she; that's one comfort."

The stately widow went down to the basement to give the necessary orders for breakfast, and Mr. Bartram led Estella up a grand, sweeping stairway, rich in gilding and painting, and statuary, along an echoing corridor, and into a suite of rooms of such Arabian Nights-like gorgeousness,

that she paused on the first threshold with a faint cry of amaze and delight. They opened one into the other—boudoir, dressing-room, bedroom—in one shining vista of color and splendid upholstery.

"Oh, Alwyn!" she cried.

And there words failed, and she stood speechless, gazing with eyes like midnight moons.

Alwyn laughed; but he also pressed her arm in warning.

"Not so loud, my dear," he said; "your maid will hear you. Here she comes. I will leave you in her charge. Your trunks will be up directly. This is your attendant, my dear. Louise, I believe the name is?"

A tall, stylish-looking damsel, in a pretty cambric wrapper and coquettish white apron, bowed low in assent.

It was quite as much as nervous Estella could do to return it.

"You will assist your mistress to dress for breakfast, Louise. Our time is nine, Estella; the bell will ring in half an hour. And you really like your rooms? I am glad of that. They are pretty, and I selected everything myself."

He drew forward a seat, placed her in it, kissed the broad, girlish forehead tenderly, and left the apartment.

And Estella for the first time in her life was a captive in the hands of her maid. She did not venture to speak; she was trembling from head to foot, partly with nervousness, partly at the strangeness of it all.

But Louise was past-mistress of her profession, and needed few instructions. She swiftly removed the traveling wraps and heavy boots, and threw open one of the large trunks.

"What will you please to wear, madame?"

She spoke respectfully, but there was a gleam of contempt in her eye. Like Mrs. Hamilton, she saw through her new mistress at once.

"I shall have an easy time," she said, inwardly. "*She* don't know anything. If that old cat, Mrs. Hamilton, minds her own business, I can about do as I like. I don't believe she ever had a maid before."

Estella had little choice to make—all her dresses were black. She chose one, and Louise arranged it and her hair, and the swift toilet was made before the breakfast-bell rung. At its first chime Alwyn Bartram reappeared.

"Dressed, Essie? Then come—come down. I wonder if you are half as hungry as I am? But of course you are not—you ladies never are. How do you like your maid?"

"Oh, Alwyn!" Mrs. Bartram said, piteously, looking up in his face, "must I have a maid? I don't know what to do with her, or what to say to her, and I had much rather dress myself. Must I keep her?"

"Nonsense, Essie! Of course you must. What to say to her, indeed! Give her your orders, of course, and see that she executes them. And for pity's sake, child, don't look so frightened of Mrs. Hamilton. She won't eat you, although you looked so exactly like Little Red Riding Hood in the awful presence of the Wolf when I introduced you. Remember, *you* are mistress here, not she, and assert yourself accordingly."

Assert herself! She shrunk like a sensitive plant at his words, and the pretty lips trembled like a child's about to cry. The brown eyes *did* fill, but she forced those puerile drops back to their source.

The next moment they were in the breakfast-parlor, where Mrs. Hamilton stood like an elderly priestess presiding over steaming urns of coffee and tea.

It was a silent meal as far as one of the party was concerned—Mr. Bartram's wife. Mrs. Hamilton's smooth flow of small-talk rarely died away, and she talked well—that kind of small coin which passes muster in society. She retailed all the gossip, all the news, and scandal and bon-mots of the past week or two with an easy glibness that was perfection in its way.

"And Clara Leesom's engagement has been made known at last. I always thought Arthur Manners paid her more marked attention than gentlemen like him pay, unless they seriously incline to matrimony. And speaking of the Manners family, Mrs. George Manners gave the most brilliant ball of the season, last week, and as usual Mrs. Rutherford was the 'bright particular star' of the occasion. They say young Lord Everleigh, who is making the tour of this continent, and was present, completely lost his head, and fell madly in love with her. He is still in New York, and haunts the Rutherford mansion like a ghost. Ah, dear, what a terrible thing a married flirt is, to be sure! is it not, my dear Mrs. Bartram?"

Mrs. Bartram, raising her timid eyes to reply an unintelligible something, caught a look in her husband's face that transfixes her.

He had grown very pale; his eyes shone with a fierce glitter, and his mustached lip curled in scorn.

"So my Lady Leonie keeps at her old tricks, does she? And the poor young lordling is badly hipped. What a lucky man old Rutherford is!"

Mrs. Hamilton shrugged her broad shoulders.

"My dear Mr. Bartram, what else could have been expected? Such a loveless, ill-assorted match! I am a very sentimental old woman, Mrs. Bartram, and still maintain that popular fallacy of my youth, that marriage without love is little better than no marriage at all. But Mr. Rutherford is going to remove his pretty wife out of the reach of danger. They sail for Cuba to-day. He has estates there, you know, and, singular to relate, she goes with him willingly."

Mr. Bartram's lip curled with still more intense scorn.

"He need not fear; his pretty wife is a great deal too worldly wise ever to compromise herself. Admirers she may have by the score—a lover never—while her husband lives. I have the honor of knowing Leonie De Montreuil tolerably well."

Estella started. "De Montreuil" and Leonie!" she remembered now 'Leonie' was the name on the portrait, and it all flashed upon her. The beautiful original had been false, and he had married her in a fit of spleen.

But "De Montreuil"—could she be that ward of her father's, recently wedded, of whom he had spoken in one of his letters to Helen Mallory?

She sat with a puzzled face throughout breakfast, longing to ask but not finding courage for her husband's face had clouded blackly, and all Mrs. Hamilton's airy chit-chat could not lift the cloud it had raised.

And so Estella Bartram was at home, and fairly launched on her new life. And Alwyn Bartram was very good to his poor little, timid bride, and took her everywhere that her mourning rendered admissible, and devoted himself to her with the assiduity of a model bridegroom. *That* way duty lay, and he honestly tried to do his duty in those first months; but he did not love her, and, in the midst of all her happiness, Estella would often see that somber cloud

darken the handsome face of her demi-god, the black eyes cloud and gloom, the perfect lips compress themselves in inexpressible pain, and know, with a pang as keen as death, that he was thinking of his lost love. For she knew all that commonplace story of woman's falsity by this time--how madly he had adored, how cruelly he had been jilted, when he lost his uncle's fortune--how, hollow-eyed and despairing, he had risen up before her, on her wedding-day, like some awful, black-browed ghost.

Mrs. Hamilton had entertained her with the interesting little romaut, and had informed her that Leonie was indeed the niece of Count De Montreuil.

"And poorer than a church-mouse, my dear Mrs. Bartram," the elegant widow said, cheerfully, "before he picked her up. They are always the worst after wealth, those adopted daughters--half-starved from childhood--on the principle, I suppose, of a burned child dreading the fire. But really those old stories about Mr. Bartram's infatuation must have been without foundation after all, else he had never fallen in love and married *you* so quickly."

She looked at Estella with her stereotyped "society" simper, and the poor little wife winced, as if a lance had entered her flesh. She knew, and Mrs. Hamilton knew, and all those magnificent ladies, old friends of her husband, who called upon her in superb toilets, knew why he had married her.

"And when is Mrs. Rutherford expected back?" she asked, in a subdued tone.

"Some time next summer, I believe--from Cuba--but she will hardly reach New York before October. Quite time enough, dear Mrs. Bartram," with an unpleasant laugh, "for Mr. Bartram to totally forget her, even if he has not done so already. Fidelity to the absent is not in the nature of man--at least of any man *I* ever knew; and yet--he *was* passionately devoted to her."

Mrs. Bartram asked no more questions, but from that hour an unutterable dread of Leonie Rutherford's return took possession of her.

Oh, if she would never come back--or if they could go away--if anything would happen to prevent her husband and this fatal Circé from meeting again! For he *was* growing fond of her in this daily companionship, and the bright-

ness had come back to her cheeks and the golden glitter to her eyes, and she was improved so much every way, in look and manners, that he no longer shrank sensitively when he presented her to his critical friends.

"For you are prettier than half of them, Essie," he said, "powdered and painted puppets, and twice as graceful. You look like a field-daisy in the center of a bouquet of flaunting sunflowers. Only, my pet, don't wear that scared face in their august presence, and try to find your tongue *sometimes*—you can talk better than they can, if it comes to that—and don't look up at them with such great piteous brown eyes. They say as plainly as eyes can say, 'Magnificent lady, I am a poor little frightened country-girl—take pity on me, and do not snub me!' I don't like it, Essie, and it makes them laugh."

The immortal rule of the Caudle Lectures was reversed, you see, in the case of this pair—*Mr.* Caudle delivered the lectures, and *Mrs.* Caudle smothered wistful little sighs, and did her best—but her best was generally a failure.

She could not get used to stately *Mrs.* Hamilton—to pert, saucy Louise—to those dashing New York damsels who chatted like magpies around her, and transfixed her with what an English writer calls "an American girl's broad stare." She could not get used to society—to stiff dinner-parties, to formal calls, to incessant dressing, and driving, and shopping, and receiving visitors, and presiding at her husband's dinner-table; and she made piteous fiascos, and excoriated his sensitive pride every day of his life.

And the months went—March, April, May, June. The city was growing intolerably hot and thinning fast. *Mr.* Bartram, who was working hard this spring and summer—really hard, and whose "*Undine*" had been a success—resolved to eschew watering-places, and be off among the mountains.

"'My heart is in the Highlands,' *Mrs.* Hamilton," he said, gayly; "I have had a surfeit of Newport and Cape May, and the rest of them. And Essie wouldn't like it, I know—she looks like a wilted lily already. I'll take her up the Hudson, and feed her on sweet milk, and new butter, and home-made bread, and have her out every morning at peep of day, and keep her on the steady tramp till dewy eve. And I will paint mountain storms, and high-

land scenery, and immortalize myself, and we will come back in October browner than gypsies, fatter than Bridget, the cook, and happier than kings and queens."

Mr. Bartram kept his word. He left New York and his gorgeous housekeeper, and the flippant *femme-de-chambre*, and all Estella's pet horrors, behind, and took her with him up among the hills. He carried out his programme to the letter; he painted assiduously, and she was ever at his side, scampering over the breezy hills, sailing on the lakes, bright and glad as the golden summer days themselves. For once she was really and truly happy without alloy—her idol was all her own at last, and—oh, blissful thought—really growing to love her! Through all the darkness of the after time, that radiant summer among the Highlands of the Hudson stood out brilliant and cloudless, the happiest time of her life.

But October came, and the gypsy life must end; they must go back to the weary city to the old tread-mill life—to Mrs. Hamilton, to Louise, to the dressing and dining, and the party-going and giving. Mrs. Bartram's heart sunk within her at the dismal prospect.

"And *she* will be there," she thought, in terror and despair, remembering the fatal Leonie; "and he will meet her, and, oh, what will become of me? If this life could only go on forever! or if that dreadful Mrs. Rutherford would never come back!"

She kept her fears to herself. It annoyed Mr. Bartram inexpressibly, this morbid dread his wife had of society, this chronic shyness and timidity. He wanted her to be like the dashing young ladies he knew, who feared nothing in heaven or earth, and yet be her own wild daisy-self still.

Mrs. Hamilton, unchanged, except by the addition of another double chin, welcomed Mr. and Mrs. Bartram back with gracious dignity upon their return early in November. And Louise took possession of her wretched little slave once more, and made her life a misery to her; and callers came, and Estella was nowhere, as usual. Invitations poured from all quarters, and Alwyn Bartram's wife was to make her *début* in general society at last.

The terrible night came—the night of her first grand ball. All in white, like the heroine of a novel—in dead white silk, that swept behind her in a train of richness, all

filmy with lace and illusion, all looped up with lilies and forget-me-nots, and crowned with lily leaves and lily buds, Mrs. Alwyn Bartram stood before her mirror, looking at herself with wild, wide eyes, and wondering if "I be I."

The snowy robe was lower of neck and shorter of sleeve than anything she had ever worn before, and she trembled as she gazed, and stood as white as the lilies in her hair. She need not; she looked lovely, almost lovely enough to bear comparison with the peerless Leonie herself. And so her husband's admiring eyes said, as he drew her to him and kissed her fondly.

"My darling!" he exclaimed, "how sweet, how pure, how fresh you look! You are like your own lilies—you are lovely to-night!"

And then he led her away, down to the carriage, and they were off to the brilliant mansion up the avenue.

Oh, happy Estella! That night shone out from all other nights of her life—the last of her wifely peace and bliss.

They were unusually late, and the gorgeous rooms were filled. And amid all the belles of the night, dazzling in the dark splendor of her insolent beauty, the first face Alwyn Bartram saw upon entering was the fatal face of Leonie!

He stood still, thrilling from head to foot. He had not expected her; he did not even know she was in New York, and there she stood before him, resplendent in roses and diamonds, her glorious eyes outflashing her gems, her ripe red lips curved in ceaseless smiles. More beautiful than he had ever seen her she stood before him—a fatal Circe to madden men.

She saw him instantly, and smiled and bowed. A moment later and she was before him, holding out her hand.

"At last, Mr. Bartram, after an eternity of separation we meet again. But people always *do* meet again in New York. And how remarkably well you *are* looking! Life among the mountains agrees with you."

He bent above the little dark hand, very pale, and with a strange glitter in his eyes. Ah, the old love was alive yet!

"I can return the compliment, Mrs. Rutherford—you are looking better than I ever saw you. I need not ask if you have enjoyed your summer tour; your face speaks for

you. Allow me to make you acquainted with my wife—Mrs. Rutherford, Mrs. Bartram."

And so they had met, the old lovers, and so the two wives stood face to face at last. Black eyes and brown eyes flashed together, in one steady glance. The rivals took each other's measure in that first second of time. Then, two tiny hands—one pearl white, the other dusk and blazing with diamonds—clasped in hollow, outward friendship.

"I have so longed to meet you, dear Mrs. Bartram," brilliant Mrs. Rutheford said, with her most bewitching smile. "I have heard of you so often, and your husband and I are quite old friends. And how do you like New York?"

From that moment Estella had but a confused memory of the events of that wretched night. Mrs. Rutherford drew her out a little, found what she was made of, and coolly dismissed her. Her insolent smile was at its brightest as she sailed off on the arm of her serf, Mr. Waldron.

"Poor little thing!" she said, with a shrug; "so pretty, so helpless, so mute! One feels for her, really! And that is Alwyn Bartram's wife!"

"She is the sweetest little creature I ever met!" responded Mr. Waldron, twirling his mustache; "and, by Jove! there's only *one other* as lovely in the room! And *you* pity Alwyn Bartram's wife! Magnanimous of you, I must say."

Half an hour later, Leonie was whirling round the long ball-room in the arms of Estella's husband. Mrs. Bartram never waltzed at her husband's expressed desire; but the rule did not apply to him. He waltzed and waltzed again, always with Mrs. Rutherford, and his wife stood a little apart and looked on. Others looked, too. There was nothing like them there—matchless for beauty and grace.

"Such a pity," a young man said—"pity to uncouple such a well-matched span! Handsome as angels, both—fallen angels, you know—and madly in love still. One doesn't mind old Rutherford—serves him right; but, egad! the pretty little wife—one feels for *her*. And she's fond of the beggar, too."

He sauntered away, never seeing the object of his compassion. And Estella, faint and sick, leaning against a pillar, never forgot, the pang of intolerable pain and jealousy that pierced her heart then.

The ball ended. Mr. Bartram took his wife home, but Mrs. Bartram shivered, unheeded, in a corner, and he sat lost in a dangerous dream.

Not half a dozen words were exchanged on the homeward way, and Estella run up to her room at once, with a full heart, while Mr. Bartram, wearied out, threw himself on a sofa in the library, and, dressed as he was, fell fast asleep.

Some hours later, when his wife entered, he still lay there—sleeping—dreaming. One arm plilowed his handsome head, a smile parted the chiseled lips. She bent above him and kissed him with passionate love. The smile died away, and murmured words came.

"Wait for me, Leonie," he said. "Oh, my darling—be true! be true!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LOST HEIR.

MR. BARTRAM slept late on that morning after the ball, and breakfasted alone in his dressing-room. His wife had arisen and gone out for a walk. Mrs. Hamilton was busy in the domestic apartment; so he had his chocolate and his waffles, and his grapes, and his thoughts all to himself. He threw on his picturesque black velvet painting robe and cap after breakfast, and went up to his atelier to work, but his "*Moon-rise on the Lake*" made very little progress on that particular day. How could he paint misty-blue hills, purple mountain tarns, faint young summer moons, and blue-black midnight skies, with the darkly witching face of that fatal sorceress, Mrs. William Rutherford, flashing between him and the canvas, with its brilliant, ceaseless smile? He could not paint; he flung away his brushes in disgust, and sat down, moodily, in the sunlit window, to smoke and exorcise his beautiful familiar. But the black, starry eyes, long, limpid, and velvety—the cheeks of pomegranate bloom—the sweet-curved, rose-red lips—pursued him until he almost went mad. He threw his cheroot out of the window with a deep oath at last, and taking up his pencil, began drawing that haunting face. *This soothed him.* Again and again he drew it—now in profile, now sad, now gay, but over and over again.

The wintery November afternoon waned, the first dress-

ing-bell rung, and still he sat gazing with glowing eyes on the matchless countenance. His wife's soft tap at the door was unheard. She turned the handle and entered, still unheard; she crossed the room lightly, with a half smile on her lips, to surprise him with a word and caress. She bent lightly over his shoulder, and saw his afternoon's work. An instant later and he was alone.

The loud clang of the dinner-bell aroused him. He started up, and for the first time his folly dawned upon him in its true light. With a second passionate imprecation, he snatched up his hand full of drawings and flung them into the blazing fire.

"Good Heavens!" he said, "what a fool, what a besotted ass, what a scoundrel I am! That woman is not worth the paper on which I have drawn her fatal face, and here I lose my whole day idiotically over her. And I a married man, too! I'll tear her out of my imbecile heart if I have to tear *it* out by the roots."

He ground his teeth vindictively as he ran up to his room. His toilet was necessarily of the briefest; but when it is only a man's wife and housekeeper who await him, what need to be particular?

"I have detained you, I am afraid," he said, as he entered the dining-room; "but up in my studio I forget sublunary things. And how do you feel after your first ball, Essie, and how did you enjoy yourself?"

"Not very well, I am afraid," Mrs. Hamilton answered for her. "She looks wretchedly to-day. Ah, my dear Mr. Bartram, I fear you will never make her a woman of society! One night's dissipation wilts the roses of a whole summer."

"Heaven forbid that I should ever make her a 'woman of society!'" Mr. Bartram answered, bitterly; "you and I know what *they* are, Mrs. Hamilton. You are pale, Essie—fagged to death, I should say; and yet you danced very little."

Estella murmured something, her lips quivering, her eyes filling; but a lump rose in her throat, and choked her voice. And he could wonder at her pale cheeks and dimmed eyes, after last night—after to-day.

"Everybody was there, I presume?" inquired Mrs. Hamilton. "I have been asking Mrs. Bartram, but

really she is not very communicative. Was Mrs. Rutherford?"

She asked the question abruptly, and she saw, and Estella saw, the dark-red flush that mounted to Mr. Bartram's swarth brow.

"Yes," he said, curtly; "Mrs. Rutherford was there."

"And handsome as ever, no doubt?"

"Handsome, I think. The Rutherford diamonds, and the plethoric purse of the millionaire agree with the little fortune-huntress."

"And Mr. Rutherford?"

"Oh, much the same as usual!" impatiently; "red-faced, loud-voiced, sulky and jealous. Estella, you eat nothing; let me help you to the breast of this partridge."

"Do you go out to-might?" Mrs. Hamilton ventured to inquire, after a pause. "I ask, because dear Mrs. Bartram really looks unfit for anything but bed."

"Then she shall go to bed: and the earlier the better. For me, I have an engagement."

He felt a twinge as he said it. Yes, an engagement for a Broadway theater, made with Mrs. Rutherford, to witness the *début* of a celebrated European actress. He had promised to take his wife to the performance, but her pallid cheeks and heavy eyes came, fortunately, to the rescue.

Mr. Bartram made a most elaborate toilet, and, looking magnificently handsome, entered the crowded theater, and sauntered round to Mrs. Rutherford's box. The enchantress, gorgeous in green moiré and sparkling emeralds, sat with her friend, Mrs. Manners, surrounded, as usual, by a circle of devoted worshipers. But she turned from them all with an enchanting smile, and held out her sparkling hand to her handsome favorite.

"Vandal! Goth! Late, and R—— playing 'Marie Stuart?' You deserve the bastinado! Ah, she is charming! I saw her in Paris; but she is ever a sort of surprise. And how is Mrs. Bartram?"

"Not very well," Mrs. Bartram's husband answered, rather moodily; "fatigued, and unable to come out. She had retired before I left."

"Ah! our terrible city life—our late hours—our gas-light—our dissipation! We hardened creatures stand it somehow, but the fresh little country beauties"—with a shrug

and a smile that stung him to the quick—"they droop like broken roses. I only trust she will be able to attend my reception next Thursday night."

Mr. Bartram bowed coldly, the frown on his brow deepening. Her half-pitying, half-contemptuous tone and smile—he understood both, and hardly knew, for the moment, whether the anger in his heart was for her or for Estella.

But Mrs. Rutherford was not going to let him grow sullen and silent; she had come to charm, and charm she would. She leaned back in her chair, looking wondrously lovely, and the almond eyes flashed up at him, and the radiant smiles shone their brightest, and the glib little tongue chattered airily, continually. She was fascinating, and she knew it; no man alive—short of a St. Stylites, twenty years weather-beaten on his pillar—could have resisted her. Alwyn Bartram was no saint—very far from it; he succumbed at once. The siren wove her fatal spells—the smiles, the glances, the lowly murmured words he had to stoop his tall head very low to catch—the witching music, the poetry of the play—all netted him round. Before the evening ended, Circe had her slave again; Alwyn Bartram forgot his wife—his promise to the dead—everything but the entrancing coquette before him. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed with triumph, when he led her to her carriage. He loved her still, and she—oh, wicked little sorceress!—she loved him, too.

"And you will not fail on Thursday night?" She leaned toward him out of her furred wraps, with a last brilliant smile. "Remember, this is Tuesday. I don't want you to forget."

"I am not likely to forget. Good-night."

He went home like a man in a dream. He was in a dream—blinded, dazzled, besotted. Estella was still awake, pale as the pillows; but he thought her asleep, and would not disturb her. He lay down on a sofa in the dressing-room, and fell into a feverish slumber; and as she haunted his waking hours, so Leonie also haunted his dreams.

Mrs. Rutherford's first "At Home," after her summer's sojourn was brilliantly attended. She was resplendent tonight in crimson velvet and rare old lace, and diamond stars ablaze in her blue-black hair. She looked like a glowing flower of the South, as she was—a little flaine of

fire—setting everything alight as she moved through her husband's gilded saloons.

The sad heart of Estella Bartram sunk within her as she looked at that dazzling beauty—so dark, so bright, so insolently peerless. Her own bright bloom of color had fled; she was as white as the roses in her hair; she looked like a spirit of the moonlight in her misty robes of illusion and pale ropes of pearls. A wan little shadow beside the flashing diamond light and ruby-velvet splendor of the millionaire's wife. She had not wished to come, but Mr. Bartram had insisted—rather angrily, too. He had no intention people should say he neglected his wife, or was ashamed of her, though both were true. His conscience was ill at ease, and he was unjust and cruel in the struggle between duty and passion, wrong and right.

The hours wore wearily on to Estella; head, and heart, and eyes ached alike with the noise, and the heat, and the glitter. She did not dance; she could not talk; she felt sick, and spiritless, and utterly worn out.

Young men shrugged their shoulders and left her. What *could* Bartram be thinking of to marry that insipid little thing?

She stole away, long past midnight, while every one else was at supper, to the long, deserted music-room, half blinded with the pain in her throbbing head.

The apartment was vast and empty; a bay-window stood invitingly open, with the cool night wind sweeping in. The balcony outside was forsaken. She seated herself in the shadow of the curtains, and laid her hot forehead against the cold glass, not half so cold as the dull despair at her heart.

"If I could only die," she thought, wearily, "and end it all! If I could only die and leave him free!"

She sat there, heedless of the cold, of the raw November night wind, of the pale moonlight, of being missed, in a dull stupor of sick apathy. Heart, and body, and soul she felt worn out—tired, sick, utterly hopeless and helpless.

"He loves her, and he will learn to hate me!" The thought surged dully through her throbbing brain. "If it were not a sin to die I would set him free to-night!"

A step, a voice aroused her—a step, a voice that would have almost aroused her from her death-sleep. Two peo-

ple swept by her on the balcony—her husband, with Leonie Rutherford upon his arm. An opera-cloak draped her in its soft folds; she clung to him, her face uplifted, her eyes passionate and imploring in the moonlight.

"I *have* repented," she was crying. "I *do* repent. Oh, Alwyn! no need to say such merciless, cruel things to me! You are amply avenged."

"Yes," Alwyn Bartram said, slowly and bitterly. "I *am* victor; but another such victory, I think, would cost me my kingdom. You have only wrecked both our lives—only made *four* lives miserable—only made me the most guilty and perjured wretch alive. I ought to hate you. I do hate you at times, and love you more madly than ever still. I have wooed a wife, innocent and spotless as the angels, who loves me with all her pure heart, and whom I vowed by my best friend's death-bed to love and cherish. Consistent, am I not—honorable, manly, worthy any woman's love? We were made for each other, I think, Leonie. We deserve each other. We both belong to the angels of light!"

He laughed a hash, strident laugh, and his dark face looked unutterably haggard and bitter in the moonlight.

"I was mad," Leonie said, with a sob. "I have repented. Oh, forgive me, Alwyn! You don't know half my misery!"

"Do I not? And yet, perhaps not, with old Rutherford for your husband. You have something that does duty for a heart then, Leonie, under your red velvet bodice! And you might safely have waited for me, and not starved on bread and water in a garret, after all. The year of probation expires next week, and Robert Bartram has not yet turned up. In six days more I claim my dead uncle's fortune—that fortune which would have made you *my* wife—do you hear, Leonie?" passionately—"my wife! had I inherited it a year since. You might have waited!"

She covered her face with her hands, sobbing impetuously, her tears falling like rain. She *did* repent; she *did* love him; how fiercely only her own undisciplined heart knew.

"Spare me!" she cried. "Have a little mercy, Alwyn Bartram! When I think of what we are, what we might be, and that it is all my fault—mine—I feel as though I were going mad."

He drew her suddenly to him; she looked up in his face through her flowing tears. She had the good-fortune, this matchless Leonie, to be one of the few women weeping does not disfigure. He caught her and kissed her like a man insane.

"Mad!" he cried. "You have driven *me* mad with your fatal beauty! We must part, Leonie Rutherford, or—I shall be a greater villain than ever earth held before. Go! leave me, and let us never meet again!"

"Alwyn," she said, trembling, frightened, yet fascinated—"Alwyn, listen to me!"

But he stamped his foot and turned resolutely away.

"Go!" he thundered, "while I am able to say the word. Estella Mallory's husband and William Rutherford's wife must never meet again."

He swung round as he spoke and left her. She stood a moment, then flitted after him—off the balcony and out of sight.

And Estella! She sat where she had sat when they appeared—rigid, moveless, colorless. She had never stirred once; she could not, and she had heard every word.

Estella rose slowly when they disappeared—cramped, numbed, chilled to the heart. Dully, she recollects that she might be missed, might be searched for, might be found there. She had no wish for that.

She tottered, rather than walked, in her blind misery, back to the ball-room. There the first person she encountered was her husband.

"I have been looking for you, Estella," he said, hurriedly. "The carriage is here; I want to take you home."

He never noticed her marble face, her dilated eyes. He was totally absorbed in his own fierce, inward struggle.

Fifteen minutes later, and still in dead silence, husband and wife were on their way home.

Mrs. Bartram kept her chamber all the next day with a blinding headache, that left her unable to move, or speak, or think.

Mr. Bartram shut himself up in his painting-room, and smoked savagely, and painted fiercely a lurid sunset on the sea. But as the twilight deepened and fell, he flung away brushes and cigars, and sought out his wife.

She lay upon the bed, her face hidden, still as death.

"Are you asleep, Estella?" he asked, standing beside her.

"No."

Her voice sounded smothered and far off; his, harsh with inward pain.

"Are you better?"

"No—yes—I don't know."

He hardly heeded her answer, he was wrapped utterly in his own fierce struggle.

"I am going to take you away, Estella—away from this accursed city"—he set his teeth—"away from this horrible life, never, perhaps, to return. I am going abroad—to France, Italy, anywhere—and that immediately. We will sail next month."

She never spoke. The white face lay upon the pillows; the mournful brown eyes looked out into the twilight in speechless despair.

"If Robert Bartram does not turn up within the next five days," her husband went on, "my late uncle's fortune is mine. He may be alive and well, and reappear any time after he chooses, but it will then be too late. My uncle's will was most unjust, most ungenerous. He had no right to let me go on expecting to inherit his wealth, and then cut me off because I could not take up his grubbing stock-brokering. His fortune will eventually come to me, in spite of that unjust will, and I am heartily glad of it. Helen Mallory's money belongs to you. I shall never touch another penny of it; it has gone against the grain to use it from the first. I shall dispose of this house and furniture, our servants and horses, and we will leave New York, and begin our new life together far away. You have no objection, Estella?"

"No."

"He just caught the faintly-breathed word—no more. He turned to leave the room.

"Then you commence your preparation to-morrow, if you are able; if not, authorize Mrs. Hamilton and Louise. Try to sleep and be able to rise to-morrow. We shall be very busy, and you will need all your strength."

He quitted the apartment, and went out into the starlit streets. Involuntarily his steps turned in the direction of the Rutherford mansion.

The carriage stood waiting before the door; of course,

Mrs. Rutherford was going out. He loitered a moment over the way, in the deep shadow, and had his reward.

Leonie Rutherford came forth, in resplendent attire, as usual, entered, and was whirled off. He just caught a glimpse of the exquisite face in the gas-light—then it was gone to light up some festive gathering; and, setting his strong white teeth, he strode on, under the cold November night.

Mr. and Mrs. Bartram began their preparations for immediate departure, and Mrs. Rutherford heard the news with bitter despair.

He could break his bonds then, after all, and leave her, and what would her hollow, brilliant life be worth when he was gone?

She paced up and down her luxurious rooms at dead of night when she had much better have been asleep, her hands clinched, her eyes ablaze, her heart torn with passionate pain.

"Oh, fool, fool, miserable fool that I have been," she thought, almost madly, "to give him and his love for William Rutherford's gold and this pitiful, empty life! And now, when I know how worthless it all is, and how I love him, it is too late! And the fortune for whose loss I resigned him will be his, after all, and *hers*! Oh, bitter, bitter, bitter is my punishment, indeed!"

The last night of the year of probation had come—very nearly the last night of Alwyn Bartram's stay in New York.

There was a dinner-party in honor of the occasion, to which only Mr. Bartram's special and select friends were invited; and neither Mr. nor Mrs. Rutherford was present.

Since that night on the balcony, the siren and her slave had never met. The siren had striven hard enough, heaven knows, but the slave was not *quite* dead to strength and honor, and had sternly resisted. They had not met, and they would never meet again if he could help it.

They were all in the drawing-room after dinner—Mr. Bartram the merest trifle exhilarated with wine and triumph, slightly flushed, quite matchless in his magnificent manhood; Mrs. Bartram, pale as a lily, languid, drooping, silent, after her recent illness—a piteous contrast to her superb lord.

There was music and laughter, and brilliant conversa-

tion, and the golden hours that made Alwyn master of his dead uncle's thousands were speeding fast, when the door-bell rung—a peal so loud, so long, so authoritative, that everybody started.

"At this hour," Alwyn Bartram said; "almost midnight! Who can it be?"

A dead hush fell. A servant flung wide the door, and, in a voice that rung through the room, announced:

"Mr. Robert Bertram!"

It was a perfect *coup de theatre*. You might have heard a feather drop, as a tall, fair-haired young man, with a handsome, reckless face, bold, roving blue eyes, and a splendid length and strength of limb strode into their midst.

A little, quiet, lawyer-like person followed; but no one heeded him. The tall young man made straight for the giver of the feast with the easy nonchalance of a prince of the blood, holding out his ungloved right hand.

"Rather late, Alwyn," he said, "but better late than never. The year expires at midnight, and it is half past eleven now. Very sorry to deprive you of a fortune, dear boy, but you see I am alive, and likely to remain so for some time to come. You know me, don't you? or have all these years of absence blotted me out of your cousinly regard?"

Alwyn Bartram stood, pale as death, gazing full at the new comer with large, startled eyes.

"I know you," he said, slowly. "Yes, Rober Bartram, I know you, and you are in time."

His last words were lost in a sobbing cry. Estella Bartram, standing unnoticed near, had fallen fainting headlong upon the floor, without word or cry.

CHAPTER XXII.

ESTELLA'S SECRET.

THE dinner-party broke up in the most admired confusion—the best metropolitan society had received a shock and a new sensation, and hurried homeward to spread the news.

It was better than the best melo-drama that ever was written. The lost heir turning up at the eleventh hour—

a Lara returning to his ancestral halls with sensational effect—Alwyn Bartram uncrowned and unseptred when every one thought him sure of his kingdom, and that pallid, excitable little shadow, Mrs. Bartram, dropping in a dead faint at everybody's feet. It was a scene unprecedented in all the whole experience of all those languid diners-out.

Mrs. Bartram was conveyed to her room, and Mrs. Hamilton and Louise bent over her with restoratives. The faint was of brief duration—the brown eyes opened, wild and wide. She started up on her elbow, with a loud, startled cry.

"Where is he?" she wildly asked. "Where is Roysten Darrell?"

"Who?" said Mrs. Hamilton. "There is no such person, my dear Mrs. Bartram. You are a little confused, I am afraid—you fainted, you know, at sight of your husband's cousin, Mr. Robert Bartram. It *was* a shock, I must allow, to the whole of us, but really I had no idea you were so excitable."

Estella had fallen back among her pillows before the end of this soothing little speech, her hands covering her face, trembling with excitement from head to foot.

"Where is Mr. Bartram?" she inquired, in a smothered voice.

"Your husband? In the drawing-room, my dear, with his cousin and that lawyer person."

"And all those people?"

"Your guests? Oh, dispersed, of course, to spread the wonderful news. Perhaps you had better not talk too much—you are not at all strong. Shall I remain, or will I turn down the light and leave you to sleep?"

"Leave me, please."

Mrs. Hamilton lowered the gas, and quitted the apartment with Louise.

But Estella did not sleep; a new and undreamed of horror had taken possession of her, body and soul. Not the sight of Robert Bartram, the heir, had caused that swoon, but the sight of the man she thought dead months and months ago, Captain Roysten Darrell. And he claimed to be her husband, and Alwyn Bartram knew nothing of that dark secret of her life, and now they were closeted together and all would come out.

"He saw me, and knew me, of course, and he will tell his story first, and Alwyn will believe him. He will only be too glad of an excuse to cast me off; he hates me already. How can he help it, loving *her* as he does? Oh, why, why, why, was I ever born?"

She lay there, suffering such anguish as few suffer in a life-time. It seemed to her—poor, despairing child—that one trouble only ended to herald in a greater. Would she ever again look upon the face of her earthly idol after this terrible night? She lay still as stone, counting the passing hours. One by one they went—pale and overcast the chill November morning dawned. No sound had disturbed the deep silence of the house—if her enemies had gone she had not heard them. And Alwyn—why did he not appear at her bedside, dark and terrible, to accuse her of her crime?

The new day had fairly broke before he came. Very pale, very stern, indeed, he entered at last, but there was no wrath in his face for her. On the contrary, he was unusually gentle and tender as he bent over her.

"My poor, little, pale girl," he said, kissing her, "awake still! Have you not been asleep at all, Estella?"

"No."

"You nervous, excitable child! I hope you are better, at least?"

"Yes."

"It was like the entrance of Banquo's Ghost, was it not—my cousin's startling appearance last night? No wonder a little, nervous subject like you fainted. Upon my word, I felt like it myself," he laughed a brief, bitter laugh. "Well, it is he, Essie—Robert Bartram in the flesh, and no spectral illusion, and my Uncle Wylder's heir claims his own. Alwyn Bartram must continue a dependent on the fortune of his wife."

She turned away her face.

What did it mean? Had Roysten Darrell then gone, and her secret with him?

"Is he still in the house?" she ventured to ask. "Does he remain here?"

"Here? Most certainly not. He went, and his legal adviser also, several hours ago; but I thought you asleep, and would not disturb you. For myself, I was long past slumber. I have been taking pedestrian exercise up and

down the drawing-room, and thinking over what is best to be done. I don't see why we need change our programme for this unpleasant little *contretemps*, Essie. We can go abroad all the same. I hate New York, and everything connected with it. I will be a better husband, and you a happier wife, with thousands of miles between us and it. We will depart as we had arranged, Estella, and turn over a new leaf, and think upon the old life only as a bad dream. In Italy—who knows—I *may* become a painter; here I am nothing. We will go, and to-morrow I will depart for Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia?"

"Yes. I have business there, and old friends to say good-bye to. There need be no fuss, and no packing. I will return in a few days. Shall you get up to breakfast, Essie?"

"If you wish it."

"Oh, it doesn't matter! I am going out. Robert Bartram has effectually taken away *my* appetite for the present. But get up if you can, and don't distress yourself about this disagreeable business. We are not quite paupers, and will do very well, I dare say. Good-morning! Let me find you up and about upon my return."

He kissed her once more, and went out. She turned her face to the wall, with a choking, hysterical sob.

"He has not told, then, after all, and I—I *can not*. If he were stern and cruel, I might summon courage to face the worst, but his kisses kill me. How can I live if I lose him? I love him so dearly—so dearly!"

There was a discreet rap at the door; her maid came to dress her. She entered before her mistress could speak, closed the door after her, and approached the bed, with a face full of importance.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bartram," said Louise, "but I have a message for you. I hope you will not be offended; if I had not brought it, one of the other servants *would*."

She put her hand in her pocket and produced a sealed note. There was no superscription on the wrapper, and Estella looked at the girl in wonder.

"Who gave you this?"

"The strange gentleman, madame, who came last night—Mr. Robert Bartram."

Estella uttered a faint cry, and started up in bed.

"What do you mean? Mr. Robert Bartram?"

"Yes, madame," responded Louise, with infinite calm. "It was after Mrs. Hamilton and I left you. I chanced to be standing in the area, talking to—to a friend, when Mr. Robert Bartram and the little gentleman, the lawyer, came out of the front door. He espied me directly, and leaned over the railings, and asked me if I were not your maid."

"Well?" breathlessly.

"I told him yes, madame, and then he said he had half a dozen words to say to me in private. My friend departed, the lawyer walked on, and he descended to the area. He asked me, as a most particular favor to deliver this note, unseen by any one; and I—what could I do, madame—I took it, and promised."

The discreet Louise finished her little narrative without thinking it necessary to refer to two broad gold eagles Mr. Robert Bartram had dropped in her willing palm.

"There was no opportunity of delivering it last night," she went on. "You were, no doubt, asleep; so I have taken the earliest opportunity this morning. I trust I have not done wrong. I hope madame is not offended?"

"No," said Estella. "Go—leave me."

"Will madame ring when she pleases to want me?"

"Yes, yes! Go!"

The girl departed. Before the door was well closed, Estella had torn open the sealed note and devoured its contents. It was insolently brief:

"MY DEAR LITTLE ESTELLA,—You know me, and I know you, and you take me for a ghost, no doubt. No, my dear; I am worth a dozen drowned men yet, old Peter Fisher's fable to the contrary notwithstanding. I sha'n't tell Alwyn Bartram that little story of the past, and I have every reason to feel certain *you* will not, if you can help it. I wouldn't tell him if I were you. He only wants an excuse to leave you for a certain black-eyed little beauty we wot of. Don't give it to him. Let us keep our secret—he will be none the worse for it. I want to talk the matter over with you. Suppose you meet me in Union Square this afternoon, at four o'clock. Come veiled, so that no one will recognize you. Don't fail, my dear, and

reduce me to the unpleasant necessity of insisting on an interview at the house.

"Devotedly yours,

"ROYSTEN DARRELL."

The worst had come. This bad, bold man was her master; she must pay the penalty of having a secret from her husband; she must pay the penalty of Helen Mallory's foolish reticence; she must meet him.

If she had only told Alwyn Bartram, in Chelsea—if she had only told him during those happy summer months up among the hills! But she had loved him so unutterably—she had feared his anger so intensely—she had been such a wretched little coward along; and now, and now—

Louise, the discreet, waited until she was weary, that morning, for madame's bell to ring. But the summons came at last, and entering, she found her up, wrapped in a white dressing-gown, and paler than that cashmere vestment.

She was afraid to meet the girl's keen eye. She had always dreaded her; she had infinite reason to dread her now.

"She will tell Mrs. Hamilton about this fatal note," Mrs. Bartram thought, "and she will tell Alwyn. The secret I have kept so long will soon be known, far and wide, now."

It was past noon before Louise finished, yet her lady's toilet was of the simplest. She had chosen her plainest dress—a black silk. It would save her the trouble of changing again before going out; and she *must* keep the appointment Roysten Darrell had made.

"I will see him once," she said, desperately. "I will hear why he did not tell all last night. This very evening Alwyn shall know the whole miserable secret I have hidden from him so long. He will never forgive me, and I—I can but die at his feet!"

She took her slender breakfast in her room. It was past two when the meal was over. Three would be early enough to start; she could walk to Union Square in less than an hour.

Her husband was still absent; Mrs. Hamilton had gone out shopping; only Louise was on the watch. But how was Louise's mistress to know that?

"There is a secret here," Louise shrewdly said to herself—"a secret money is to be made of. I will watch little Sly Boots. She will go out some time to meet this man who sent her the note."

Louise had her reward. A quarter past three, the door of Mrs. Bartram's room opened, and Mrs. Bartram, in a dark hat and mantle, and closely veiled, glided forth.

The girl waited until she had nearly gained the corner of the street; then she, too, veiled and cloaked, glided from the area and followed.

Estella walked all the way to Union Square. The city clocks were just chiming four as she reached it, and the first person she beheld was Roysten Darrell, lounging on a bench, smoking a cigar, indolently watching the passers by, and looking like a Saxon king, with the afternoon sunshine glinting on his leonine hair and beard and brilliant azure eyes.

He flung away his cigar, and started up to meet Estella, holding out his hand, with a triumphant smile that showed every glittering white tooth. He knew the slender, girlish figure, despite the long, disguising mantle and the pallid young face—despite the close blue veil.

"I thought you would come, Mrs. Bartram," he said, coolly; "*doubly Mrs. Bartram*, since two lucky fellows of that name claim you as their dear little wife. By George! you're an out-and-out modern heroine, Estella. They all commit bigamy in the novels, nowadays, and the first husband's sure to turn up. I thought it would give you a staggerer when you saw me last night after taking it for granted all these months that my bones were bleaching at the bottom of the cursed Irish Sea. Well, I *had* a narrow escape. The 'Raven' and all on board—poor devils—went to Davy Jones, Carlotta among the rest. But a fellow born to be hanged—you know the pleasant old proverb, eh? Come, let's sit down, Essie; here's a retired nook, and no one is likely to recognize you through that blue screen."

She sunk upon the bench—literally, she was unable to stand. Physically and mentally she was worn out—her very lips were the pallid blue of death.

She was all alone—a poor, little, snared bird in the net of the fowler—a helpless waif, drifted about at the mercy of every tide, with no friend to turn to for counsel and

advice. She sat, with great, piteous brown eyes fixed in unutterable dread on the bold man's face.

He took out another cigar, seated himself near her, and held it up.

"May I?" he said. "I can talk ever so much better when I smoke, Essie. So you see, my dear little girl, Roysten Darrell, the husband you run away from so cleverly, whom you tried to poison on his wedding-night—ah, that was a shabby trick, Estella—turns up again, *not* Roysten Darrell, but Robert Bartram—Robert the Devil. Upon my word, you might have knocked me over with a feather, when, coming home from that luckless voyage, I found out my old Uncle Wylder was dead and done for—Alwyn, the favorite, disinherited, and Robert, the scapegrace, the black sheep, made heir. And the next news I hear is that Alwyn is married—has married an heiress, a little girl from Chelsea, name Estella Mallory. I didn't faint, Essie; and that was saying a good deal for my nerves."

He laughed, puffing away vigorously at his cigar; and Estella sat, with both hands pressed hard together in her lap, listening in a silent trance of unspeakable dread.

"That was over four months ago; Estella; and why did I not come forward at once, you ask, to claim my own? Well, for no better reason, my dear, than that it did not suit my humor. I made my case clear to old Parchment, the lawyer—got my pockets replenished—took life easy, and bided my time. I run down to Fisher's Folly, and Peter told me about your adoption by the late Miss Mallory, and your romantic marriage with Alwyn. What did he marry you for, Essie—love or money?"

Still mute, she sat drinking in every word, but totally unable to utter a syllable.

"You're a pretty little thing enough, Essie," run on Mr. Robert Bartram, "but you're by no means the radiant beauty Mrs. Rutherford is, and these painter chaps always go in for no end of good looks. He was disinherited and he was jilted, and you are an heiress, and he marries you. Not very flattering is it, Essie? You had better have stuck to *me*."

Still no reply. Terrified, bewildered—all words refused to come. She sat like a little dark statue, waiting for her doom.

"And he loves her yet," went on her merciless companion—"that little black-eyed enchantress—and she loves him; and, my faith! if they don't make a moonlight flitting of it in the end, I shall be more surprised than I have been by anything that has happened yet. Don't give him the chance, Estella—leave him before he leaves *you*. Return to your first and rightful spouse, who is willing to overlook the past, and take the bride who tried to poison him back to his heart."

"I never tried to poison you," Estela said at last with a sort of sobbing cry. "You know I meant it for myself! Oh, I wish—I wish I had drunk it that night, and ended my misery at once!"

"Then my handsome cousin makes his little wife none too happy? I thought as much. Come, then, Estella, leave him, return to your rightful husband, give him the go-by—take your revenge—let him lose wife and fortune at one fell swoop."

"I am no wife of yours!" the girl cried, passionately; "I never was, Roysten Darrell! I will never speak to you—never look upon your face again! I will go straight home from this, and tell my husband everything."

"Do," said the young man, coolly, "and when he turns you out of doors, with hatred, and scorn, and rage, return to me. I don't set up to be a Christian, but in this case I am ready to obey the Scriptural injunction, and forgive seventy times seven; for the instant you tell him you are my wife—and that is what you must tell, Essie, if you speak the truth—he will turn you out, neck and crop. I know my Cousin Alwyn, you see, my dear, and I know the Bartram pride, which, thank the gods, I have none of. He will cast you off, glad of an excuse, and he will go to the divine Leonie for consolation, and—will get it."

She uttered a low cry of misery and despair.

"What shall I do?" she said—"what shall I do?"

"I will tell you," said Robert Bartram, flinging away his cigar. "I feel for you, Essie—upon my soul I do. You love this black-a-vised cousin of mine ten thousand times more than he deserves, and he doesn't care as much for you as I do for the ashes of this smoked-out cigar. Look here, now, I'm not your enemy, and I'll keep your secret. He's in the dark; let him stay there. Keep the story of the past to yourself, and I will do the same."

But to his surprise Estella started to her feet, her pale cheeks flushing, her brown eyes kindling with sudden fire.

"No!" she said. "I have deceived him too long—I will deceive him no longer! Let the consequences be what they may, he shall know all. Let him cast me off if he will—I can hardly be more miserable than I am now, and, at least, my conscience will be at rest. I will tell him all, and he shall judge between us. I am no wife of yours, as you well know, Roysten Darrell."

The ex-captain of the "Raven" shrugged his broad shoulders.

"As I do *not* know—you *are* my wife, and I can prove it. Do as you please, Mrs. Robert Bartram—for that is your name—but as surely as you tell, so surely will I claim you and take you, but if you will not spare yourself, why should I be a fool? Go home; tell Alwyn Bartram; he will send for me. I have proofs of our marriage no court of justice will dispute. The clergyman who married us still lives at Rockledge—so do the witnesses—so does Peter Fisher; and here in my pockets is our license and certificate. Go and tell him—the sooner the better—for within the hour I carry you off, my lawful, wedded wife. Good-evening to you, Mrs. Bartram—I dine at five. For the present we must part, but to-morrow I trust to take you to my arms, to lose you no more."

He raised his hat, made her a courtly bow, a diabolical smile of derision lighting his sunburned, handsome face and glittering sapphire eyes; then he was gone, and bewildered Estella was alone.

A gentleman passing, stopped suddenly to look at her; went on, stopped again, and looked back. He had caught the last words; he had seen her face through the veil; he had even heard the name pronounced, and yet he could scarcely believe his eyes and ears. It was Mr. Waldron, and he had recognized the lost heir, Robert Bartram, at a glance.

"Can that be Estella Bartram?" he said, to himself—"can it be?"

He stopped again, this time to see the slender figure flit away, and vanish in the November dusk.

"What the deuce is she doing here, and with Robert Bartram? and what did Robert Bartram mean by those

last words, ‘take her to his arms to lose her no more?’ And she such a little, demure puss, too! Neither man nor woman was ever the better for knowing too much of that reckless scapegrace, and we all took little Essie for a sort of wedded St. Agnes! And now, what would Alwyn Bartram say—Alwyn Bartram, as proud as the demon and as jealous as a Turk?”

“ Halloo, Waldron!” called a familiar voice out of the gloaming, and a gloved hand fell lightly on his shoulder; “moralizing in Union Square, like Hervey among the Tombs? What is the meaning of that mystified face?”

And Mr. Waldron looked up, and into the smiling face of Estella’s husband.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ROBERT BARTRAM’S REVENGE.

“DID you meet your cousin?” was the first question Mr. Waldron asked.

Alwyn Bartram linked his arm through that of his friend, and walked him off briskly.

“Come, step out! I go to an aristocratic symposium to-night, and time wears apace. Did I meet Robert Le Diable? Yes at the other entrance of the square. Hang the fellow! why couldn’t he wait another month, before turning up? Truly that wise old saw, ‘There is many a slip—’ was never more strikingly verified. It was like the entrance of the ‘Marble Guest’ in the opera.”

He laughed lightly, but his dark brows contracted. Far more than he had felt it a year ago, he felt the loss of his uncle’s fortune now. To be a dependant upon the bounty of his poor little unloved wife was unutterably galling to his proud spirit.

“How is Mrs. Bartram?” Mr. Waldron inquired, with a queer, sidelong look; “quite recovered from her fainting fit, I trust?”

“I trust so,” carelessly. “I have not seen her since early morning. She is a nervous, hysterical little thing—a trifle upsets her. I dare say she took Robert Bartram for a ghost.”

“She never knew him before, did she?”

“Knew him!” Alwyn stared broadly. “My dear fel-

low, of course not. How could Essie know that reckless, ne'er-do-well? Why do you ask?"

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Waldron said, a trifle embarrassed, "I saw him talking to a lady just now in Union Square, and I give you my word, Bartram, I took it to be you wife at first. But she was closely veiled, and no doubt I was mistaken."

"Yes," responded Mr. Bartram, in a tone of calm conviction, "you were mistaken. Estella never saw my graceless relative until last night, and is never likely to see him again."

Mr. Waldron favored his companion with a second queer, sidelong look. He had his own opinion about that.

"Is the French notion that *all* husbands are made to be duped true, then, after all?" he thought. "Can even little Mistress Innocence pull the wool over the eyes of her sharp-eyed lord? That was Estella who sat there, keeping an appointment with Reckless Robert, and if I owned a wife, by George! he's the last fellow alive I'd want her to be on speaking terms with." Then, aloud: "So you still adhere to your original resolution, Bartram, and go abroad?"

"At once. To-morrow I go to Philadelphia, where I will possibly remain over a week; by the same token, one is never too fit for traveling after a supper at Porte Crayon's rooms. Will you show, Waldron?"

"For an hour. I go to the Rutherford 'At Home' tonight—this is Thursday evening, you know. You never appear at those grand crushes now?"

"No," replied Mr. Bartram, moodily, "and never will. I have had enough of the peerless Leonie. Who is the latest victim?"

"That handsome Austrian diplomat from Washington—the Marquis of something—I forget the name—terribly crack-jaw, though. He knew her uncle, the Count De Montreuil, in Paris, and struck up an intimacy at once on the strength of that knowledge. They are going the pace faster than Madame Leonie ever went it before. We outsiders find the game matchless fun, particularly when old Rutherford is scowling on. I fancy the little Rutherford don't care a fillip for the Austrian, but she is losing another victim for whom she *does* care, and grows wild and desperate. Poor little girl! I think she doesn't take

kindly to the gilded matrimonial fetters. *Le jeu ne vaut pas*—the what's its name, you know. Do we part here? Well, *allons*—we meet the captains at the citadel. I'll say good-bye and *bon voyage*, at Porte Crayon's reunion."

The two men parted. Alwyn Bartram reached home not five minutes after his wife, and ran up at once to his dressing-room. The frosty November night, all sparkling with keen stars hung over the gaslit city long before his toilet was made. He drew on his hat and loose overcoat, and ran down-stairs, pulling on his gloves, looking, as he always looked, elegant and handsome enough for a prince. The drawing-room door stood wide—the gaslight poured down its soft, abundant radiance, and standing alone in a pink dinner-dress, he saw his pale little wife. He stopped at once, and came in.

"Ah, Essie," he said, kindly, "better, I see? You and Mrs. Hamilton will not wait dinner this evening; I dine out. And by the by don't sit up for me. I will probably return late. Wakeful nights don't agree with you, my pale little girl. Your cheeks are whiter than the japonicas in your hair. Go to bed early, and go to sleep, and as I will most likely be off in the morning before you are up, I will say good-bye now. Take care of yourself, and grow a trifle less pallid and anxious-looking before I return. I will be back from Philadelphia in a week."

He kissed one of the colorless cheeks—the cold, careless kiss he always gave his wife. Then, before she could utter a word, he was gone.

Mrs. Hamilton dined alone that evening. Mrs. Bartram, after taking the trouble to dress, did not even make a pretense of dining. She ascended to her room, and shut herself in, and all the long, lonely hours of that sleepless night she did battle with the supreme sorrow of her life alone.

Mr. Bartram returned as gas-lamps and twinkling stars were waxing dim in heaven and earth. He had barely time to snatch an hour's sleep in his dressing-room, don traveling-gear, order a cup of coffee and a hack, and start for the railway. He made no attempt to see Estella, and she, poor worn-out child, had but just dropped into the deep sleep of utter weariness, half an hour before his return.

Mr. Robert Bartram called in the course of the day, and sent up his card to the mistress of the house.

She had but just breakfasted—pale and heavy-eyed, with her wan little face whiter than the Christmas snows.

It was Louise who brought up the card, and a verbal message:

“He says he has something most particular to say to you, madame. He is waiting in the drawing-room.”

Estella went down. Timid as a fawn, with no self-reliance, with no one to look to for counsel or advice, not the least in the world strong-minded, what could she do? What was she, frail little reed, to cope with this giant oak?

“I thought you would come,” Robert Bartram said, with his glittering smile; “it is your best policy, Essie. Keep friends with me, my dear little girl, and all will go on velvet. So *mon mari* went to the City of Brotherly Love, bright and early this morning, and without discovering his little Essie had been to Union Square yesterday afternoon? Then you found second thoughts best, and didn’t tell, after all?”

“I did not tell, because I could not,” Estella replied, the mournful brown eyes meeting the mocking blue ones. “I had no opportunity. But upon his return he shall know all.”

“Then, by Jove! I had better get my pistol hand in practice at once. How is he, Essie—this second husband of yours—a crack shot? There’ll be a duel as sure as your name is Estella, and I’ll wing him if I can.”

The brown eyes dilated wild and wide—the pale lips parted—the colorless cheeks grew livid with a new terror. She had never thought of *that*, and what more likely? In all her novels they fought duels for less than this, and who was to tell her the romantic age of duelling had passed away?

“No!” she gasped. “A duel? Oh, no, no, no! Not for ten thousand worlds!”

“Well, it shall be just as you please, Estella, of course; I don’t care. It will not be my first time out, by long odds; but one don’t care to shoot one’s cousin. Blood’s thicker than water, they say, and Alwyn, poor devil, never did me any great harm. You start for Europe, they tell me, immediately upon his return. Why not keep your little secret till the ‘vasty deep’ rolls between us? I

don't care, I repeat, but for your sake, you know. Once safely on shipboard, make a clean breast of it, if you like, and—who knows—the excitement of the story may cure a fit of sea-sickness."

She covered her face with her hands, and broke out into hysterical sobbing. She wanted to do right so much—to tell all—and she dared not—she dared not! She was hemmed in on every side—utterly in the toils!

"Don't cry, Essie!" Robert Bartram said, a little touched. "It's hard on you, I allow, but, after all, what he doesn't know can't harm him. Keep your secret forever, if you please; I sha'n't peach. I own Alwyn Bartram more than one grudge, but I don't bear malice. We won't tell him, and he'll never know you were once my wife."

He stopped—the door had creaked. Quick as lightning flashes she had flung it wide, and discovered Mrs. Hamilton. She started back, pale with guilt.

"Come in, madame," said Robert Bartram, with imperturbable *sang froid*; you'll catch cold, airing your ears at key-holes. My dear Mrs. Bartram, this lady has been listening to our conversation. If there is any part of it she did not overhear, perhaps you will kindly repeat it. For myself I have not time. Good-afternoon, mesdames, both!"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Bartram!" said Mrs. Hamilton, drawing herself up stiffly. "I am not accustomed to play the eavesdropper, or being insulted by the accusation. I discovered this note on the floor of Mrs. Bartram's chamber, and came here at once to restore it. I rapped, but your conversation was too absorbing, apparently, to permit you to hear me. Here it is, Mrs. Bartram—excuse me for interrupting your *tête-à-tête*, and permit me to withdraw without bringing it to an untimely end."

Her dull little eyes gleamed vindictively. Estella, white and frightened, held out her hand for the crumpled paper, and uttered a low cry as she received Robert Bartram's note. *He*, too, recognized it at the same instant.

"Ah!" he said, "culpably careless of you, Mrs. Alwyn Bartram, to leave your *billet-doux* knocking about in this manner. You have cast your eye over it, have you not, dear madame? How do you like the style of composition?"

"I disdain to reply!" Mrs. Hamilton said, scornfully, sweeping out of the room. "It is quite in keeping with

all I have ever heard of Mr. Robert Bartram to insult a lady!"

He held the door open for her to pass out, with a smiling bow. Then he shut it, and looked at Estella.

" You have put your foot in it, Essie," said Robert Bartram, solemnly; " the game's up! That old cantankerous catamount has read every word. Put the note in the fire and deny all black, when Alwyn returns, and never be so foolish as to keep tell-tale documents loose about you again."

He turned as he spoke and strode out of the room. And Estella cowered down, her face hidden in her hands, lost in a trance of shame, and misery, and despair.

Mrs. Hamilton, with flashing eyes, and malignantly compressed mouth, walked straight from the drawing-room to her own apartment to begin her work of mischief.

Robert Bartram was right—Mrs. Hamilton had overheard, and the game was up. Her face was full of vindictive triumph, as she drew the writing materials before her, and sat down to indite an epistle to Mr. Alwyn Bartram:

NEW YORK, Dec. 8, 18—

" DEAR MR. BARTRAM,—If your business will permit you in any way, I really wish you would make all possible haste back home. Circumstances of a most mysterious, most startling, most painful nature, have transpired since your departure. I feel it my painful duty—sorely against my inclination, I assure you—to report those circumstances now.

" Were you aware, dear Mr. Bartram, that your wife and your cousin, Robert were old friends? Something *more* than friends, I greatly fear from all I have heard and seen of late, and exceedingly anxious to keep the fact of that old friendship from *you*—you, of all people alive, who should know every antecedent of your wife. He has written to her—she has met him by appointment in Union Square. He comes here, and holds long, private conversations with her, and—but perhaps I had better detail facts as the facts occurred.

" You will recollect, then, that on the first night of Mr. Robert Bartram's most unlooked-for appearance, your wife fainted dead away at sight of him. We attributed it at the time to her hypersensitive nerves, and pitied her accordingly. Alas! dear Mr. Bartram, I fear something

far worse caused that fainting fit. Mr. R. B. took no notice on the occasion, apparently, but before leaving, his sharp eyes signaled out Louise, and he bribed her to deliver a note to her mistress, which he had, already prepared, in his pocket. You see by this that he expected to meet her. Louise, I regret to say, like most of her class, proved corruptible—took the bribe and delivered the note. Mrs. Bartram received it with much agitation, read it, and by some strange infatuation did not destroy it. That afternoon, closely veiled and plainly dressed, she went out, on foot and alone. Louise, scenting a secret, followed her, saw her enter Union Square, and meet Mr. R. B. They seated themselves in a quiet corner, and indulged in a long talk. Mr. R. B., Louise says, seemed insolently familiar, laughed and smoked through the whole interview, while Mrs. Bartram cried behind her veil, and looked frightened and distressed. They parted about dusk, and the girl says you barely missed encountering them, for you passed her, with your friend, Mr. Waldron, a few minutes after they separated. Next morning you left for Philadelphia. And now comes the most painful part of my painful story. To-day while arranging some trifles in Mrs. Bartram's chamber I found a crumpled paper on the floor. Almost unconsciously I picked it up and glanced over it. Judge of my horror to find it the note delivered to Louise by R. B., insolently familiar in tone, and signed *Roysten Darrell*. My first impulse was to give it to Mrs. B. and say nothing more about it; but upon second thoughts I found such a course would be basest injustice and ingratitude to *you*, my kind friend and employer. I sat down and copied it—that copy please find inclosed. I can not comprehend its strange insinuations; perhaps you can do so. Having copied it, I took the original document in my hand and went to look for your wife to return it. Louise met me, and informed me with a meaning smile, she was in the drawing-room, entertaining Mr. R. B. I knocked at the door; they did not hear me. I knocked again; still they were so absorbed in conversation that it was unheeded. I turned the handle to enter. As I did so, these words spoken by Mr. R. B. reached me plainly:

“ ‘ I owe Alwyn more than one old grudge, but I don’t bear malice. We won’t tell him, and he’ll never know you were once my wife.’ ”

"I stood stunned. At the same instant the man's sharp eyes saw me; he sprang up, and addressed me with insolent insults. His words left me but one dignified alternative. I passed from the room, came straight to my own, and sat down to write this.

"Now, dear Mr. Bartram, I earnestly trust you will not be offended with me. I am doing what I feel my duty. Come back, I entreat—come back at once, before this dreadful scandal becomes public. There is some terrible mystery to be revealed; for pity's sake come back and find it out. R. B. is the most vicious and unprincipled of men—no fitting acquaintance for any pure wife or maiden. Come back, I implore you, and forbid him the house.

"Faithfully yours,

"HENRIETTA HAMILTON."

Mrs. Hamilton's malicious old face glowed with triumphant malice as she folded and directed this precious letter.

"I think I have paid you out, Mr. Robert Bartram; and as for you, my spotless little dove from Massachusetts, we'll see whether you are any more spotless than your neighbors, after all."

The housekeeper posted her letter, and prepared to meet Mrs. Bartram with her Judas smile and treacherous, caressing voice. But Estella kept her room all next day, too utterly heart-sick and miserable to meet any one.

On the second day, Robert Bartram called, but Estella refused to see him. He smiled coolly as Louise delivered the message, took out his pocket book, scribbled a line or two in pencil, and handed it to the girl.

"Give Mrs. Bartram that," he said, "and tell her I will call again to-morrow evening."

Louise took up the note, untwisting it by the way, and making herself mistress of its brief contents:

"I must see you before A. returns. It is highly important. Don't plead illness, and come down when next I call."

"He has her in his power," thought Louise, "or he never would write like that. She will see him to-morrow for certain."

Louise was correct in her surmise. When, late the following afternoon, Robert Bartram reappeared, he was

ushered at once into the drawing-room, and Estella, pallid and wan as a spirit, glided in after him, wearing still a loose, white morning-robe.

The white cheeks, the hollow, mournful brown eyes, the dark circles beneath them, told their own sad story of "tears at night instead of slumber."

"Sorry to see you looking so poorly, Essie," Robert Bartram said, in his cool way. "The fellow isn't worth breaking your heart over. If he cared for you, now! but bah! that black-eyed little houri is more to him than a ship-load of pale Estellas. Let the beggar go, and take up with *me* again. I'm the richer man, and the better-looking man of the two; and, by Jove! I've a far better right to you than he has, as you know."

His blue eyes glittered with devilish malignity as he uttered the words; for in the half-open door-way he had caught sight of a tall, dark figure, standing motionless, listening to every word.

"Come, Estella," he said, encircling her waist suddenly with his arm. "You don't really care for Alwyn Bartram, you know, and you *do* care for me. Then leave him forever and come with me."

She broke from him with a loud, wild cry—a cry so full of horror and despair that it haunted him to his dying day.

The dark figure had strode forward and confronted them. There before her, pale as death, stern as doom, stood Alwyn, her husband!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SECOND FLIGHT.

A SECOND'S dead silence—Alwyn Bartram, white to the very lips with a horror too intense for words, Robert Bartram with his insolent, defiant smile, his glittering triumphant, azure eyes, and Estella numb—stone still—ghastly as death.

Robert Bartram was the first to speak.

"My good cousin," he said, his diabolical smile at its brightest, "this *is* an astonisher! Haven't you returned from Philadelphia with embarrassing suddenness? I give you my word, we no more expected to see you--this lady

and I—than the ~~Marble Guest~~ in ‘Don Giovanni.’ I hope you haven’t been ~~deserving~~—our conversation was not intended for other ~~ears~~ than our own.”

He looked full at his cousin’s eyes as he spoke, his own gleaming like blue fire. The wicked, brilliant eyes never faded—his arm still clasped the benumbed, unconscious Estella.

“Release my wife,” were Alwyn Bartram’s first words, spoken in a dull, thick voice; “stand off, Robert Bartram, and let her go, or by the eternal Heaven, I’ll shoot you like a dog!”

He thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat and drew forth a revolver. At its first sharp click, the ex-captain of the “Raven,” as daring and reckless a bravo as ever trod the pirate’s quarter-deck, dropped his arm from the slender waist, as though it were red hot. There was *that* in the livid face and dark, deadly eyes of his cousin Alwyn that told him he would keep his word.

“So,” said Robert Bartram, with a short laugh, “we go fast, my friend! I’m not afraid of you, nor your six-shooter, dear old boy; but pistol practice in the presence of a lady is not to be thought of. Put up your ugly little toy, Alwyn—you’ll frighten Essie into fits, and we can come to an amicable understanding without its intervention. Put it up, and don’t glower upon us in that diabolical way. Take things easy if you can, and tell us how you came to drop upon us here like an avenging angel, when we took you to be safely located in the pleasant City of Brotherly Love?”

Alwyn Bartram drew out a letter and handed it to the smiling speaker.

“Did you write that?” he asked, in the same unnatural voice.

“Did I write this? No, my Alwyn, I did not. My big, slap-dash fist isn’t in the least like this spidery scrawl, a ‘crabbed piece of penmanship,’ as the fellow says in the play. But if you ask me if the composition is mine, I answer unhesitatingly, yes—and the signature, ‘Roysten Darrill.’ Don’t you know I dropped the Bartram when I started in life on my own hook and became Captain Darrill, of the good brig ‘Raven?’ Ah! those were merry days, when I was ‘Reckless Roysten,’ king of the quarter-deck, and master of a set of as bold spirits as ever scoured

the high seas, or cheated the revenue of our country. I wrote a letter to little Essie here on the night of my arrival—the night she fainted, poor little girl—and this is a verbatim copy. Your worthy housekeeper sent you this, I dare swear?"

"Tell me what it means."

The two men stood eying each other with faces of deadly meaning—Alwyn livid to the lips, Robert flushed, smiling, triumphant.

"A long story, my Alwyn—too long to tell standing. Let us sit down comfortably—here's Essie, looking fit to drop. Estella, my dear, don't wear that frightened face—no one shall hurt you. Come, here is a seat."

In the height of his malignant victory, that paid off many an old score, he encircled her with his arm for the second time, and turned to lead her to a sofa. But suddenly as lightning strikes, Alwyn Bartram's strong arm shot right out straight from the shoulder, and his clinched fist struck the bravo between the eyes with a dull thud bad to hear. It was a blow to fell an ox—it laid the muscular captain of the "Raven" flat on the carpet, with a fall that shook the house, the red blood spouting high.

It was the first thing to rouse Estella from her dull torpor of horror. With a wild, womanly scream at sight of the flowing blood, she fled to the door, and fell prone headlong on the threshold.

The noise of the fall, the sound of that piercing scream, had brought the whole startled household, with Mrs. Hamilton at their head. The master of the house glanced over his shoulder, with a face of dark, changeless color.

"Take her away," he said to his housekeeper; "and for the rest of you begone."

The housekeeper and the lady's-maid understood all at a glance. Between them they raised the insensible Estella, and in dead silence bore her away. As the drawing-room door closed again the fallen hero scrambled to his feet and dashed the flowing blood out of his blinded eyes.

"You shall pay for this, Alwyn Bartram. Yes"—with a fearful oath—"you shall pay dearly for this! There are some things only heart's blood can wipe out, and a blow is one of them."

"And a disgraced wife another," the artist said, in a voice that never rose. "I understand you, and you shall

have your will. Now, then, let us understand each other, if we can. What is my wife to you?"

"Your wife?" Robert Bartram retorted, with a sneering laugh; "your wife, poor fool! Why, she has never been that for one short hour!"

"No? Then what is she?"

"Mine, Alwyn Bartram—mine, my handsome artist cousin—mine, my fastidious hero of the paint-pot! Mine, long before she ever saw you, and mine, by all that is mighty above, she shall be again! Ah! Cæsar's wife must be above suspicion, must she? How does Cæsar like it when he knows she is not his wife at all? It is paying you back in your own coin, my lady-killing Adonis—the pale, little Essie has tricked you as nicely as ever the bewitching Leonie Rutherford tricked the millionaire."

"Will you explain?"

"And you will take it coolly, will you? I thought the Bartram blood was hotter than that. Yes, my dear Alwyn, I will explain. Before ever Estella Mallory left Fisher's Folly and fled to her Chelsea aunt she was my wedded wife."

"What proof have you of this?"

"You don't believe my word, then? Every proof that ever existed of a marriage. Here is the certificate duly dated and signed—read it for yourself. If that does not satisfy you, ask Estella, and see what she says. If that does not convince you, take a little journey to Rockledge; see the church register; have an interview with the clergyman whose name is appended to that paper; examine the witnesses; ask Estella's late guardian, Mr. Peter Fisher. If all that is not proof sufficient, then the devil is in it!"

"Enough! Being your wife, as you say, why then did she leave you and fly to Helen Mallory?"

"A girl's whim—she was young and silly, you know. It was dull for her there. Peter Fisher was a grim old tyrant—she and I quarreled—she was jealous of my little stewardess, Carlotta. She even tried to poison me—quite true, upon my honor; ask her if you don't believe me, and I see you don't. And she would have done for me—killed me as dead as a door-nail—only she overdid it—doubled the dose, and the doctor and a beneficent stomach-pump came in time to save my precious life. The little fiendess got frightened and ran away—made out

Chelsea somehow and her aunt, and I never set eyes upon her again until I saw her in this room as your wife. You look blank, my worthy cousin, and no wonder. You took her for an angel, didn't you? and you find out she's the other thing. But the whole story's gospel facts, for all that, as she can tell you herself, if she chooses to speak the truth."

"Did Helen Mallory know all this?"

"Can't say; but I think it extremely likely. I'll do both her and Estella, though, the justice to say they thought me dead before she married you. Old Peter Fisher sent them an account of the wreck of the 'Raven,' and the loss of all hands, so little Essie thought herself a widow when she became your wife. And now, Mr. Alwyn Bartram, you have heard the whole story, and when our little account is settled, the survivor can take his rival's widow with the happy consciousness that she is all his own at last. Good-evening to you—a friend of mine will wait upon you presently. They say—those others—the age of dueling is obsolete, but a Bartarm never shows the white feather. Go to Essie, let her deny, if she can, that she was my wife before she was yours."

He was gone—his felt hat pulled over his eyes—swaggering down the house steps. The friendly twilight and the broad brim of his hat hid that ugly gash between his eyes. He laughed, a wicked, demoniac laugh, as he gained the street.

"Who is victor now, Alwyn Bartram? Curled darling of the gods, who wins at last? I think our old boyish scores and grudges are likely to be cleanly wiped out *this* time. You have crowed it over Robert the Devil many a long year, my handsome artist-cousin, but it is a long lane that has no turning. We have got to the turn, and I take your fortune, your wife, and your *life* at one fell swoop. I hate you, my elegant Alwyn—I have hated you for many a day, and if you leave our little rendezvous alive after that blow between the eyes, then Robert Bartram's good right hand and steady eye will have lost their cunning for the first time."

Two hours after that, while yet Alwyn Bartram sat alone in the darkened drawing-room with his unutterably bitter thoughts, a tall, black-bearded gentleman, with very much of Robert Bartram's own dare-devil swagger,

was ushered in. The servant lighted the gas, and the master of the house arose to receive the visitor, with a face that seemed carved in stone.

"And if something horrid doesn't happen soon," remarked the servant who lighted the gas, returning to the kitchen conclave, "then I'm a Dutchman. Master's got ten years older in one hour."

The black-bearded stranger's visit was of the briefest. A quarter of an hour, and the street door closed behind him, his errand satisfactorily concluded.

"I will call upon your friend, Mr. Waldron, then, immediately," he said, with his blandest smile. "And the hour—seven to-morrow—the place, Weehawken. Don't trouble yourself in any way, my dear sir; Mr. Waldron and I will arrange all minor matters. Good-night."

It was Mr. Bartram who let his black-a-vised visitor out in person. As he closed the door, Mrs. Hamilton came sweeping along the hall, with a concerned face and a mighty swish of silk. The young man turned his rigid, death-white face to her.

"Is Mrs. Bartram better? Is she awake?" he asked.

"Yes—to both questions. Dear Mr. Bartram, I have been *so* anxious to see you—so anxious to know whether I have done right or wrong in sending you that fatal letter. Believe me, I—"

But he cut her short with an imperious wave of his hand.

"That will do, madame—I understand you and your motives perfectly. Later we will find time to settle our little account. Where will I find my—your mistress?"

"In her dressing-room."

He waited for no more. He ascended the stairs and went straight to the apartment named. Without ceremony he opened the door, and saw Estella on her knees, her face buried in the pillows of a lounge. She lifted her pallid, haggard face in speechless terror to the tall dark form and stony countenance of the husband she loved—the husband she had lost.

"One word, Estella," he said, in a deep, concentrated voice, his dark eyes seeming to burn into her very soul—"Only one word, and the truth, *if you can*. Are you Robert Bartram's wife?"

She lifted her imploring hands with a piteous, hysterical sob.

"Alwyn!" she cried, "for the dear Lord's sake—"

"Hush," he interrupted, sternly; "no more hysterics—no more deceit. I have asked you for one word—I will hear no more. Were you ever married to Robert Bartram—yes or no?"

"Yes—but—"

"That will do! Living or dead, I never want to look upon your wicked, treacherous face again!"

With the merciless words—the mercilessly cruel words she might never forget to her dying day—he turned and left her—the bitter words of farewell; the last he was ever to address to her for many and many a weary year! With a low, long, wailing moan, the wretched girl flung herself down among the yielding pillows.

"Oh, my God!" was her passionate cry, "let me die—let me die! What have I ever done that my life should be all one long torture?"

She lay there for hours. The night had fallen—the cheerless December night. The snow fell and the wind blew; the fireless room grew icy cold. But she never stirred—the inward anguish dulled all sense of outward suffering.

"Oh, merciful Lord," her tortured, undisciplined heart cried, "grant me a short life! My misery is greater than I can bear!"

Morning broke—a dull December morning, lowering, bleak, and overcast. With its first sickly dawn, Estella's husband left the house, entered a cab waiting at the door, and joined his friend Waldron. The order was "Weehawken Ferry," and the carriage whirled rapidly away through the fluttering snow and wailing wind.

And the hours sped on, and Estella never stirred. Worn out at last—worn out in body and mind, in heart and soul—the poor little girl-wife had fallen asleep, as condemned men have slept the hour before hanging.

She woke with a start long past noon, for the dull, wintery afternoon was darkening already. She awoke and sat up, with a confused sense of voices in her ear. The door of her room was ajar, and the voices came from the passage without.

"And I say it's a shame, and a burning shame!" exclaimed the indignant tones of the head house-maid, "for that old prying cat of a housekeeper to be there ordering

us about as if she was mistress, and Mr. Bartram's own wife knowing nothing about it! If poor Mr. Bartram dies—and goodness knows he looks like a dead man now—I wonder how she'll ever face missis again?"

"Well," said kitchen damsel number two, "I don't know, of course, but they do say—Louise and them—that it is all missis' own fault. Master caught her a-kissing of Mr. Robert Bartram in the drawing-room last night, and master knocked him down, and Louise says they've been and fought a duel. Master never asked for missis, you know, Susan, when they carried him upstairs, and he was able to speak then. My opinion is, Mrs. Bartram ain't no better nor she'd oughter be. These sly ones never is. Still water runs deep."

The girl stopped aghast, for there, before her, like a ghost new risen, stood her young mistress.

"What is it, Susan?" she asked, hoarsely. "Is Mr. Bartram hurt?"

"Yes, ma'am—that is to say, no ma'am—at least not very badly, I hope," stammered the girl, recoiling.

"Where is he?"

"In the red room, ma'am; but, oh, if you please, you are not to go there! Mrs. Hamilton told me the doctor ordered it."

But Estella pushed her aside and went straight on, her white face settling into rigid calm. The worst had come, then; her terrible fears were realized. In one instant of time the frightened, irresolute girl was changing into the resolute woman—the determined wife.

She walked straight to the red room, the sumptuous guest-chamber of the house. She opened the closed door, and stood for a second or two in the threshold.

The room was darkened. Around the stately bed were gathered the family doctor, Mr. Waldron and Mrs. Hamilton.

She closed the door, and came gliding forward, noiseless, colorless as a spirit, with wild, wide eyes.

Mrs. Hamilton rose up, with a low, angry cry.

"*You here!*" she said. "This is no place for you. I told them to keep you away. Mr. Bartram is ill--dying, perhaps. Go!"

"I will *not* go! If my husband is ill—is dying—my place is by his side. I will never leave it until he drives

me away himself. No earthly power shall make me! Do you go, Mrs. Hamilton, and give place to me, his wife!"

The brown eyes lifted, and looked full, and straight, and dauntless into the astounded housekeeper's face. Then she bent over the bed, knelt down beside it, and kissed the death-cold face. Rigid, marble-cold, marble-white, Alwyn Bartram lay, the faint breath scarce stirring between the bloodless lips.

"My love—my love!" the girl murmured, softly; "I may kiss you now. Oh, my darling, if I might only die for you!"

The inexpressible pathos of the few simple words went straight to the hearts of the two men. But the housekeeper's eyes blazed angrily.

"Will you allow this?" she said, in a fierce whisper; "you, doctor—you, Mr. Waldron! You both know what has transpired—what she has done. If Mr. Bartram dies, she is his murderer! How dare she come into the room?"

"Hush!" exclaimed George Waldron, sternly. "Her right is first and best, until the man whose wife she has been chooses to dismiss her. She shall stay; her claim here is sacred. She has been Alwyn Bartram's wife."

Estella lifted her drooping face, and held out one slender hand.

"You are very good to me, Mr. Waldron. Some day I will thank you; I can not now."

The pale, tearless young face drooped again, and lay in one clay-cold hand of the man she loved. One whispered sentence more she spoke without looking up.

"Will he die?"

"I hope not—I believe not," answered the doctor, "with unceasing care and tender nursing; and he will have both now, I know. Mrs. Hamilton, you need not resign your post, Mrs. Bartram is young and inexperienced; she will merely be assistant nurse."

Half an hour later Mr. Waldron and the doctor left the darkened and hushed house together, and walked arm in arm down the street.

"That girl is the victim of some foul conspiracy on the part of Robert Bartram," George Waldron said, emphatically. "That fellow is cold-blooded enough and devilish enough for any earthly crime. If an angel were to descend and tell me she was guilty, I would tell that angel to

go hang! Guilt never looked at mortal man out of such a pair of innocent, sorrowful eyes as she lifted to me half an hour ago."

"Alwyn Bartram, at least, believes in her guilt," said the doctor. "He told me her own lips had confirmed it. Poor little soul! she is little better than a child, and she always loved the fellow a thousand times better than he deserved. If he were not dying, or next door to it, I would say it served him right. He has neglected that pretty little wife from the first for that bold-faced beauty, Leonie Rutherford."

"What a sensation our little affair will create, to be sure!" Mr. Waldron said, lighting a cigar. "The avenue will be more exercised over it than it has been for a month of Sundays. The two Bartrams will be the lions of the day. Pity one is too ill, after his bullet through the lungs, and the other too far fled to enjoy it. A duel in these days of prosaic humdrum is really refreshing—a step backward into the realms of romance. I told Alwyn Bartram, this morning that I thought he was an idiot for his pains, and I think so still. Fancy standing up at day dawn, a target for Robert the Devil, getting a ball through his left lung, and all for—what?"

"He's a dangerous scoundrel, that Robert Bartram," observed the doctor. "There was deadly murder in his eye this morning if ever it was in mortal man's. An inch lower, and that ball would have gone straight through his cousin's heart. As it is, we'll bring him round; that little wife will nurse him back to health if earthly woman can do it."

"And get quietly divorced for her pains as soon as her idol recovers, you'll see," said George Waldron. "And now, *au revoir!* What a catechism your patients will put you through, doctor, about this! I'll step up to-morrow morning and see how Bartram fares, poor devil! Until then—"

The two men parted to meet again next day by the bedside of their mutual friend. They found the wounded man as death-like and motionless as ever, and Estella sitting alone in the room wan and worn as some little spirits of the moonlight.

"So the head nurse deserts her post, and the little as-

sistant has it all to herself," observed the doctor, with a smile. "I thought as much. Where is Mrs. Hamilton?"

"Gone to bed."

"Have you sat up all night alone?"

"Only since two o'clock; I begged Mrs. Hamilton to retire. She was falling asleep in her chair."

"Humph! And our patient? But I suppose he has scarcely stirred. Well, it is fortunate for him he has his devoted little wife to watch over him. I wouldn't give a fillip for his chance of existence left to the tender mercies of Mrs. Hamilton. His life lies in your sleepless care, Mrs. Bartram; see that you bring him round."

Estella gave him a grateful glance out of her great, sorrowful brown eyes, and stooping, kissed one of the cold, lifeless hands.

"I will do my best," she said, simply. "I would die to save him an hour's pain."

And so by the bedside of her unconscious husband Estella's days and nights were spent now. There never was a nurse half so devoted; she seemed to live without eating or sleeping; his every want was anticipated; the slightest direction of the physician was never forgotten.

She grew thinner than a shadow, more bloodless than a ghost; but she never faltered at her post. Day-time and night-time you found her there, sleepless and unwearying.

"She said she would die to save him," George Waldron exclaimed, "and she is doing it now. She will save his life, but she will kill herself."

The death-like stupor of the wounded man had passed, and fever and delirium set in. The handsome face was flushed burning red, the dark eyes wildly glittering, the wandering tongue running at random.

And Estella's reward for all her sublime self-abnegation was to sit by that delirious sick-bed and hear the husband she idolized rave unceasingly of *his* lost idol.

"Leonie! Leonie!" was the changeless burden of his cry.

The present was a blank; his brief wedded life was blotted out; the happy days when Leonie De Montreuil was his plighted wife were lived over again.

He mistook his pale, watchful wife for his brilliant, false lady-love. He called her all the endearing names. He

would take his food, his drink, his medicine from no hand but hers.

"Love me, Leonie! Be true to me!" was his cry. "Oh, my darling, no one will ever love you again as I do!"

And Mrs. Hamilton's malicious eyes would gleam triumphantly upon the tortured face of the devoted young wife, whose womanly martyrdom was so sublimely endured.

"When fever is in, truth is out," she said, spitefully, one day. "Pity he can not forget his only love!"

But this phase passed, too, and life, and strength, and reason began to return to the wounded man. He opened his eyes one day after a long, healthful sleep, and fixed them full upon the face of Estella, no longer burning with fever, but calm and clear. An instant later, and she had shrunk away from sight, and Mrs. Hamilton was bending over him in her place.

"Water," he said, feebly.

And the housekeeper held a cooling draught to his lips.

"I have been ill," he said, in the same faint tones.
"Have I been long—"

"Nearly three weeks," Mrs. Hamilton answered, suavely. "But you are quite out of danger now, dear Mr. Bartram."

"I've been in danger, then?" slowly. "I remember it all. And he—where is Robert Bartram?"

"No one knows. He has fled."

"And you have been my nurse all these weeks, Mrs. Hamilton, you alone?"

The dark eyes looked full and steadily into hers, as he asked the question.

"Certainly—I have been your nurse. It was the least I could do for my kind friend, surely."

"And no one else? I thought I saw another face a moment ago, Estella's."

"All your imagination, dear Mr. Bartram," Mrs. Hamilton said, smoothly. "But supposing you *did* see her, what then? Hers is surely the best right here."

"She has no right here," Alwyn Bartram replied, slowly and steadily. "You must know that by this time, Mrs. Hamilton. No greater cheat or hypocrite ever lived than she has been to me. No poor fool was ever more egregiously duped than I have been duped by her. I will

never see her, never speak to her again while I live. I never loved her. I have good reason to hate her now."

Dead silence fell. The effort of speaking had exhausted him. Mrs. Hamilton glanced sideways at her victim. Even her hard woman's heart might afford to pity that victim now.

But Estella was cowering down on the floor, her face hidden in her hands, never speaking, never stirring. Like Cesar, when her time came he could "cover her face and die with dignity."

Alwyn Bartram spoke again.

"Is she here?" he asked—"still in this house?"

"She is."

"Well, no one has a better right—the house is her own. Only tell her from me to keep out of this room until I am able to leave it. It is all hers, but I will linger beneath her roof no longer than I can help. I resign her and her fortune together—only tell her to keep out of my sight while I must remain."

"She shall hear it," Mrs. Hamilton said, in a subdued tone. "Pray don't excite yourself, Mr. Bartram. Don't talk any more. Try to sleep if you can."

"If I can," he repeated, in a low, bitter voice. "If I could sleep and never awake it would indeed be well."

But he dropped asleep even with the words on his lips. And Mrs. Hamilton turned to the crouching figure on the floor, with a touch of compassion on her hard face.

"You had better go, Mrs. Bartram, before he awakes again. In his present state the sight of you might be fatal."

She arose at once, and turned a face so awfully corpse-like—eyes so glazed and blinded—upon the housekeeper that the worthy woman recoiled from her as from an apparition.

"Good Heaven! she looks as though she were in a fit. My dear Mrs. Bartram—"

"I am going," Estella said, hoarsely. "I will never come back."

She staggered—literally staggered—from the room as she spoke, grasping blindly at the objects in her way. She closed the door behind her, and went on to her own room. Not once had she looked at him on her way.

The day wore on. As night fell, Mrs. Hamilton, fidgety and uneasy, went herself to Mrs. Bartram's room. The

door was locked upon the inside. She rapped, and it was opened at once by Estella herself.

"Dear Mrs. Bartram, I have been so anxious! I am glad to see you looking better than when you left me. But you have eaten nothing hardly all day, and dinner is ready. Will you not come down?"

"No; be good enough to excuse me, Mrs. Hamilton, and dine alone."

The door was closed and relocked. Mrs. Hamilton shrugged her broad shoulders, and descended with a very good appetite; and Estella, left alone, lighted the gas, drew writing materials before her, and, with a face fixed in stony calm and a hand that never faltered, she wrote these lines:

"I heard all you said to Mrs. Hamilton—I was in the room at the time. You never loved me—you hate me now—living or dead, you never wish to look upon my wicked, treacherous face again. Well, you never shall; be at rest, I will trouble you no more. To-night I leave you forever. I have only one word to say to you—the last I will ever say to you—I *am innocent*. You will not believe it—you may never know the truth—but I loved you—I will love you to my dying day, and I am innocent. May the good God bless you and make you happy! I will pray for you as long as I live.

"ESTELLA."

That was all. No tear fell upon the paper as she wrote; the inward anguish was too deep. She folded her note, sealed it, addressed it, then knelt down by her bed, and laid her poor, pale face thereon, as if she never cared to lift it again.

The hours of the night wore away—the house grew very still. Long after midnight—so long that the first bleak gray of the December morning was lighting the black night sky—she lifted her head and arose. Her hat and mantle lay near. She put them on, took up a little bundle she had made, and walked to the door.

One backward glance she gave—one long, lingering heart-broken glance.

"Good-bye," she said, "my pretty room, where I was once so happy!"

She opened the door and went out; the stillness of the

grave reigned. Noiselessly she flitted down the wide, carpeted stairway—noiselessly she gained the front door—noiselessly she opened it, and faced the raw, bleak, wintery day dawn. An instant later, and it had closed behind her, and she was fluttering away, a lonely little waif in the bitter blast.

For the second time Estella had fled—for the second time a desolate wanderer, wrecked in the world.

CHAPTER XXV.

SWIFT RETRIBUTION.

MRS. HAMILTON passed a very uneasy night. Whether it was remorse for the past, or apprehension for the future, or a heavy dinner undigested, no one knows; but worrying dreams made her pillow restless. The pale, sorrowful face of Alwyn Bartram's wife haunted those restless slumbers like a reproachful ghost. Once she saw her, lying cold and still in her winding-sheet and coffin, and at her approach the corpse had arisen, the large dark eyes had opened, and the livid lips parted in awful words. "Look at me!" those dead lips said. "I am what *you* have made me, Mrs. Hamilton!" and Mrs. Hamilton had started up in bed in a panic of mortal apprehension, the cold drops standing on her brow. It was broad morning—the dull December daylight filled the room.

"Good Heaven!" the housekeeper thought, "if anything has happened to that unfortunate little creature what will become of us? She looked last night like a galvanized corpse. I will go to her room at once."

She threw on her dressing-gown, thrust her feet into slippers, and sought Estella's chamber. She tapped—there was no answer; she turned the handle—the door opened at once, and she went in.

The chamber was empty—the bed had not been slept in all night. On the table lay the letter. Mrs. Hamilton pounced upon it immediately, saw the address, and guessed the truth.

"She has run away—that wretched child! What, in Heaven's name, will she be mad enough to do?"

The gummed flap of the envelope was still wet. Without an instant's hesitation Mr. Bartram's high-bred house-keeper opened it and read the letter from first to last.

"Gone!" she thought, palpitating in utter dismay; "tied! that grown-up child, as ignorant of the vice and misery of this great city as a new-born babe! Oh, what on earth will become of her? Mad girl! and yet one can hardly blame her. I will take this letter to Alwyn Bartram at once."

She placed it in the envelope, closed it securely, and hurried into the sick man's room, her sallow complexion sea-green with terror.

The night-nurse was asleep at her post; the patient lay wide awake, his great, haggard, dark eyes looking unnaturally large and bright out of his pallid, shadowy face.

"You are awake, Mr. Bartram," the housekeeper said, approaching; "not very long, I hope? How did you pass the night?"

"Much as usual," wearily. "What has happened, Mrs. Hamilton? From whom is that letter?"

"From your wife, I fear. I found it in her room this morning—the room deserted—the bed unslept in. I don't wish to alarm you, Mr. Bartram, but I greatly fear she is gone."

"Gone!" the large, dark eyes opened larger and darker. "Gone!" he repeated, slowly; "gone where?"

"Fled—run away—gone for good. I regret to tell you she *was* in this room yesterday, and overheard every word you said to me. She is highly sensitive, and that may have— But if you feel strong enough, perhaps you had better read the letter. Doubtless it will explain."

She handed it to him, and he tore it open in fierce haste. An instant, and he read it through.

It was impossible for his death-white face to grow any whiter, but an awful, rigid change came over it. He dropped the letter, and turned upon the woman.

"When did you find this?"

"Just now—this instant—I came directly here. I have been uneasy about Mrs. Bartram all night—so uneasy I could not rest, and I went to her room the first thing this morning. I found the room deserted, as I tell you, and this on the table. I feared something of the kind, Mr. Bartram. I never saw such a look on any human face as I saw on hers last night—poor little soul!"

There was real compassion in the housekeeper's tone.

For the first time in her life, perhaps, she knew what it was to feel remorse.

"The look on her face as I saw her last will haunt me to my dying day," she said, softly; "if the human heart can break, I think your words broke hers last night."

"For God's sake, go!" Alwyn Bartram cried, hoarsely, passionately. "Do you want to drive me mad? We will find her—we *must* find her Go, I tell you—go!"

"I am going, sir," Mrs. Hamilton responded, with dignity. "And here is your friend, Mr. Waldron—will you admit *him*?"

"He will admit me," Mr. Waldron said, very gravely, coming forward, "for I have news he will be glad to hear. Will you kindly leave us, Mrs. Hamilton?"

Mrs. Hamilton looked curiously at him, but his face was grave and impenetrable.

"News he will be glad to hear," she thought, sweeping out; "what can it be? Has he found the little runaway, and already?"

Mr. Waldron bent over the bed, and looked at his friend. It was his first visit for over a week. A telegram had taken him suddenly out of town—he had only just returned, and still wore his traveling suit.

"No better, Alwyn?" he said. "You look almost worse than when I left. But I have news for you, old boy, that will heal every wound—great news—glorious news! I come to restore you a wife and a fortune!"

Alwyn Bartram stared at him with wild, questioning eyes. The same idea flashed through his mind as through Mrs. Hamilton's—he had found Estella. But the fortune?

"I have been out of town for the past week, Alwyn," he said, taking a seat by the bedside; "do you know where and at whose summons? You would never guess. At Robert Bartram's."

Still Alwyn did not speak—he lay blankly gazing—blankly wondering.

"And Robert Bartram is dead! Do you hear, Alwyn?—dead and buried! His earthly mischief is over at last."

"Dead!"—he lay dully staring at his friend. "Dead!" he repeated, in hopeless amaze.

"Dead, poor fellow! One can pity the dead, you know, and a terrible death, too. He was burned alive."

Alwyn Bartram uttered one faint exclamation of horror, then lay perfectly still—waiting.

"I found him in Washington," Mr. Waldron said, rapidly: "he made for the capital when he left here. And his death was heroic enough—a tenement house in flames, a child forgotten in an upper room. You know what a reckless, impulsive fellow he always was—he rushed through the flames and smoke to the rescue of the screaming child. Both perished—the burning roof fell upon them. The child was stone dead when drawn out from the flaming débris—Robert Bartram was still alive. He lingered long enough to telegraph for me—to do one act of justice before life left him. I saw him laid in the grave day before yesterday, and hastened here at express speed with his dying deposition. Alwyn Bartram, as soon as you are able, go down on your bended knees and ask your wife's pardon. She is the most wronged and most innocent of women."

He looked for some expression of eagerness, of delight, but none came. The sick man's pallid face turned absolutely livid as he listened. He tried to speak, but only a dry, rattling sound came from his parched lips.

"Here are the dead man's dying words—written by me—duly signed and witnessed—the last words he ever uttered. The deposition is brief; shall I read it aloud?"

There was a faint answering motion; the power of speech seemed paralyzed in Alwyn Bartram.

Mr. Waldron drew a folded paper from his pocket, opened it at once, and began to read:

"When you see this, Alwyn Bartram," it abruptly began, "I will be in my grave—beyond the reach of your pardon or your curse. The first I do not ask—the second I do not fear. I die as I have lived—dreading neither man nor devil—Reckless Robert to the last. But I want to do one poor little girl an act of justice—the only mean or pitiful act of my life was wronging her. But it was to wreak vengeance on *you*. I stood in your debt, my good cousin, for many an old grudge, and through her I wiped them out. The deed of a coward and a poltroon, was it not? I have been ashamed to look my own face in the glass ever since, by Jove! and I don't think I could rest easy in my grave with my story untold.

"Well, then, Alwyn, Estella is innocent—innocent as

those angels our mothers told us about in the days long ago when *we* were innocent, too. She never was my wife; never for a moment, I swear it! She always feared and detested me, and she loved *you*—you ungrateful beggar! with her whole good little heart, as no man alive that ever I knew deserved to be loved yet.

"The way of it was this. Old Peter Fisher—hang him, the miserly old screw—got a letter from Miss Helen Mallory, of Chelsea, saying that Estella's father had turned up —was a millionaire, lawfully wedded to her sister Estella, anxious to claim his daughter and heiress, and ready to pay all back-standing debts contracted for her; come down like a prince, in fact. Old Peter Fisher sends for me. 'Look here, Roysten,' says the old hypocrite—I was Roysten Darrell, the smuggler captain, then—'let's make a good thing of this. Let's marry Estella; then her husband claims his share of his rich father-in-law's wealth. You're young and clever and good looking,' says Peter; 'what's to hinder *your* marrying her, Roysten, my boy, and sharing the spoil with me?' 'Nothing,' says I, 'but that she hates me like poison. She'll never do it, you'll see.' 'We will make her,' says he; 'it will go hard with us if you and I are not a match for one little girl. I'll make her marry you, or I'll know the reason why.' Well, I was willing; a wife more or less, seeing I had a couple of dozen already, made little odds to me. I was willing and I said so. Old Peter Fisher broke the news to Essie. As I said, there was the dickens to pay immediately. Essie protested she wouldn't; she would die first, and so on. We didn't believe her, but, by George, she meant it! A chap there, in Rockledge—a friend of hers, who had never told his love but let concealment prey upon his damask cheek—brought her some books that evening. She told her story to him; told him she had no avenue of escape, and he took heart of grace, and proposed one immediately. Let her marry *him* to escape me. Well, she hated me; she rather liked him, poor imbecile!—she saw no other way out of her difficulties, and she consented. They arranged it all—they were to elope a few nights after, get married on the quiet, and snap their fingers at Peter Fisher and Roysten Darrell. Would you believe it? I was in hiding near by, and heard every word. The night arrived—dark and rainy—the carriage was waiting for the bride, and so was I—the other

bridegroom was safely disposed of. Estella came, mistook me in the dark for Dick Derwent, and—we were married! That is to say, one of my men, of a theatrical turn, played parson, and performed the ceremony, and I drove Estella back to Fisher's Folly, and announced myself as her husband!

"Fancy the scene that followed. The amaze, the anger, the hysterics. The girl was spunky—all the powers of earth wouldn't compel her to own me for her husband. It ended in her being locked up in the garret for her contumacy by old Peter Fisher, and being frightened into fits by the rats. Then followed a brain fever—I went to sea; she had recovered when I came back, and I proposed a second marriage, a public one; and she agreed on condition that I would release Dick Derwent, whom we still held prisoner. It was in very desperation she consented. We released our unlucky captive, and, in desperation still, she tried to take her own life. She failed—she fled—she made out Helen Mallory—told her story—had a second fit of illness—received news upon her recovery that *I* was drowned—met you, and what came after that you know.

"There is the story. Why you did not hear it long ago is the only mystery; but it is certain the fault of the secrecy was the dead aunt's, not the niece's. Estella loves you devotedly; is true to you as the needle of the North Star. She met me in Union Square, poor, little, frightened child! because she was afraid to refuse—because she knew not what to do for the best—because she thought the ceremony she had undergone with me was a real one—because she feared what afterward occurred that we would quarrel and fight, and *you*, her precious darling, might get hurt. She was afraid of you, too; she knew you did not love her; that you were madly infatuated about that gypsy, Leonie; and between all, the unfortunate little creature was nearly frantic. But she is your wife—true and pure and spotless in thought and deed—as high above you in truth and innocence as heaven is above the earth—a million times too good for her foresworn husband. Get her to forgive you, if you can—though if she had an atom of spirit she would see you at the bottom of the sea first! Take her back, and take old Uncle Wylder's fortune with her. Go to Italy, as you proposed, and daub canvas and waste paint to the end of your days. Forget the little

Rutherford, and follow the maxim of the copy-books: 'Be virtuous, and you will be happy!' Tell Estella I am sorry for slandering her—the only act of my past life I *am* sorry for, except, may be, that I didn't finish *you* while I was about it, and accept the parting benediction of

"ROBERT BARTRAM."

George Waldron paused and grasped his friend's hand with a glowing face.

"Was I not right, Alwyn—glorious news, is it not? By Jupiter! if I had the power I would canonize Robert le Diable for this one good deed. Upon my honor, I am as glad as if some beneficent fairy had left me Aladdin's lamp. I always liked your pretty little rosebud of a wife, old boy. I always knew she was spotless as an angel; I always said so; I felt it in my bones from the first that there was foul play somewhere. Come, rouse up, Alwyn Bartram! Send for her, poor, little sorrowful soul. Tell her the truth—go down into the valley of humiliation—kiss and be friends."

But no answering light came into the deathly face and dark, dilated eyes of the sick man.

"Read that," he said, hoarsely, thrusting Estella's letter into his friend's hand, "and tell me if ever murderer on this earth was more blood-guilty than I."

George Waldron read the letter through, and looked up with awfully blank face.

"Gone!" he said; "run away! I never thought of *that!* And you really said those merciless words in her hearing? Alwyn Bartram, you have done a cruel and shameful thing! Do you know that she has saved your life—that night and day she was ceaselessly by your sick-bed—that she forgot to eat or sleep in her devoted care of you? and the first words you utter, when, under God, she restores you to health, are the words that drive her from you forever. Bartram, we read of 'seething the kid in its mother's milk'—I think I know what it means *now.*"

"Go on," Alwyn Bartram said. "I ask no mercy; I deserve it all! But I believed her guilty."

"Because you *wished* to believe her guilty—because you did not care enough for her to find out her innocence for yourself. I would have torn it from Robert Bartram's lying throat; and so would you had his victim been Leonie

Rutherford. But enough of this. If that child's heart is not broken—and she is only a child, Alwyn Bartram—if her brain is not crazed with misery—if she has not rashly taken her own life—we will find her. Poor little Estella! if wife ever worshiped her husband, she worshiped you, and verily she has her reward!"

"For God's sake, stop!" the tortured man passionately cried. "I deserve it all, but I *can not* bear it. Don't try to drive me mad?"

George Waldron arose.

"Let us hope for the best," he said. "I will act for you, my poor fellow, until you are able to act for yourself. We will find Estella yet."

He left the room as he spoke. And Alwyn Bartram turned his face to the wall, and was alone with his deathless agony of remorse. In that hour Estella was avenged—in that hour he fought the bitter battle she had been fighting so long—in that hour the old infatuation for Leonie Rutherford died out forever and ever. In the years to come, he might meet her daily, hourly, but the fire was dead—the black ashes could never rekindle—the siren's fatal power was at an end.

And the search began—the search they thought so easy at first.

"I will find her before night," George Waldron thought as he left the house; "she will not commit suicide; but Alwyn deserves his fright."

Night came, but she was not found. Another night and still another—and yet no clew. The week came to an end—still no Estella. Another week—a third—always hopelessly in vain. Detectives were on the track—every daily in the city held pathetic entreaties to "Estella" to return—immense rewards were offered—still, still utterly in vain.

Alwyn Bartram, a month later, left his sick-room—the pallid shadow of his darkly handsome self—to join in that fruitless quest. Earth held nothing half so dear to him now as the hope of finding his lost wife. Now, when it was too late—the old story, alas!—he knew what he had lost—he saw his own mad folly and cruelty—he saw her sublime self-sacrifice, her devoted love, her patient, womanly martyrdom so long endured. What he suffered—his unavailing regret and remorse—was known only to Heaven and himself.

The story of the runaway wife was ringing through the city—Alwyn Bartram was the hero of the hour. Every one pitied Estella now—every one found out they had always liked her—poor, little, timid creature! Every one said, loudly, she had been shamefully ill-used. And one after another the weary weeks went by, and, living or dead, Estella Bartram was not to be found.

Alwyn went first to Chelsea, and sought out Helen Mallory's old servant, Norah. He found her established in a little candy and toy store, more grim and resolute-looking than ever.

"And so you have ill-used her; and she has run away from you," Norah said, with terrible grimness. "I'm not surprised—I knew it would happen. I told her so; but she didn't believe me, of course. But she hasn't come here, Mr. Bartram. I've never set eyes on her since you took her away, and I never expect to in this world. Hadn't you better drag the rivers, or search the dead-houses? you'll be most likely to find her *there*."

And then Norah turned her back upon him and threw her apron over her face, and doggedly screened behind it, refused to utter another word.

He bore it all patiently—he, the proud, the passionate—but he was utterly broken down. He went back to New York, and recommenced the search. Every means that man could use, with limitless wealth at his disposal, he used, and still vainly, vainly.

The long winter passed, and only when the April buds were green on the trees was that remorseful search given over in dull despair.

"Living or dead, I never wish to look upon your face again!" those were my own pitiless words," he thought, with a bitter groan; "and living or dead, I never will! The only being on earth who ever loved me I have driven by my merciless cruelty to a suicide's grave!"

"It is of no use, Bartram," George Waldron said to him, with a dolorous shake of the head. "You must give it up! You are killing yourself, old boy, and *that* will do no good, you know. Better go abroad, as you intended—to take to your easel and paint-brush once more, and try to forget."

"To forget!"

It was all he said, but George Waldron always remem-

bered the despair of that haggard face—of that low, bitter voice; and he knew that, until his dying day, Alwyn Bartram would never forget the great trouble of his life.

But he took his friend's advice; before sunny April drew to a close he had left New York for Italy.

"Estella is dead!" were his last words to his friend on the steamer's deck—"Estella is in heaven! She never committed suicide—I know that; but I know likewise," in a tone of calm conviction, "that she is dead. And I know, George Waldron, that I am as much her murderer as though I had held the knife to her throat. If you ever send any kind wishes after me, let them be that my life may mercifully close soon!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DAWN OF A BRIGHTER DAY.

A BRILLIANT spring day was ending in a misty spring evening. The "young May moon" sailed serenely up the star-gemmed sky, and the lamps twinkled athwart the still streets of "dull Chelsea."

A soft breeze fluttered the leaves of the budding trees, and the distant rumble of the "cars rattling over the stony street," or the faint, far-off barking of a dog, were the only noises to disturb the placid stillness of the quiet thoroughfare where Norah Styles kept her toy and candy shop.

It was after tea with Norah, and her little parlor was swept and garnished, and she stood looking out of her shop window with a face whose dark moodiness even three cups of the best "English breakfast tea" had not been able to remove.

She was thinking of lost Estella—she very seldom thought of any one else now—thinking in bitter sorrow of all she must have endured, of her lonely, loveless end. For, like Estella's husband, Norah never doubted for an instant but that she was dead.

"Drat the men," Norah said, vindictively—"drat the whole of them! I never knew a good one yet—leastways exceptin' some clergymen, an' *they* were men that never got married, or thought of it. Thank the Lord I kept clear of them in youth and in age, not that many of them ever wanted me, but if they had, and I had been fool

enough to take them, I would have been a broken-hearted, miserable creature like the rest long and many a day ago. I told Miss Helen what I thought of that handsome black-a-visored young man. I told Miss Essie, too. Neither would believe me, of course. Now see how it's turned out! And they're all alike—all alike."

"Men are deceivers ever," whether they mean marriage or not. Unconsciously Norah was paraphrasing the immortal Shakespeare—a gentleman of whom she had never heard—and very likely both were near the truth.

While she stood there, a carriage—a private carriage—the most elegant Norah had seen for many a day, dark-blue and glittering, with two superb black horses in silver harness, and a shining black coachman, looking like a dusky Bishop of Carthage—whirled up to the door. To her door—yes! and stopped, and a tall young man in livery got down from behind and held open the door.

A lady alighted—a young lady, in a tasteful gray traveling-suit, lighted up with brilliant blue ribbons, and a blue feather in the pretty gray hat. Under this hat fell a shower of rippling brown ringlets, falling beneath the slender, girlish waist.

A gentleman leaned forward to speak to her out of the carriage window—a tall, elderly gentleman, with a haughty, handsome patrician face and silver hair—at first sight of whom Norah Styles staggered back with a low cry of amaze that was almost a cry of horror.

"Call for me in half an hour, papa," the young lady said, turning round; "I will be quite ready then."

That voice—that face! Norah stood perfectly paralyzed. Never on this earth had she expected to hear or see either again.

The carriage whirled away, the shop-door opened, and Alwyn Bartram's young wife stood smiling on the threshold.

Yes, Estella! Estella, more fashionably and elegantly attired than Norah had ever seen her—Estella in very truth; and yet not the Estella of old.

Thy shy, wistful, childish look was gone; this young lady seemed eminently self-possessed and self-reliant. The old bright bloom of color was gone too—a fixed and changeless pallor seemed to have taken its place, and the large brown eyes looked at you with a sadder beauty than of

old. Estella, the girl, was gone; Estella, the woman, the wronged wife, stood in the door-way, ten years older in as many months.

"Dear old Norah!" she said, with a little laugh; "how you stare! Do you take me for a ghost? Shake hands, and see."

She held out her hand, daintily kidded, until it seemed like a piece of gray marble; and Norah took it, still in that bewildered dream.

"Wake up, Norah!" Estella said, gayly. "It is your Essie in the flesh—no spirit of earth or air. Say something nice in welcome, for I have come a long way to see you, and to-morrow I shall be away again. Ask me to come in and sit down, and we will tell each other all the news."

Norah awoke at last, and found her breath and her voice.

"For the Lord's sake, Miss Essie, is this you? And where do you come from, and how does that old foreigner come to be here again, and with you?"

"That old foreigner! Speak more respectfully of my father and the Count De Montreuil, if you please, madame! Where do I come from? That is what I want to tell you, if you'll only give me a chance. Is that your boudoir I see in there, Norah? Let us go in and make ourselves comfortable, out of the way of your customers. My father will be back for me in half an hour, and already 'time is on the wing.'"

She drew from her belt a little watch, so thickly studded with sparkling gems that it made Norah wink again. Bewildered still, she led the way into the humble parlor, and placed her rocking-chair—her seat of honor—for her unexpected visitor.

"No, no!" said Estella; "keep your throne of state for yourself, Norah, and I will sit here at your feet, on this creepie, as I used to long ago, in the dear old house in Poplar Street. Ah, those pleasant days, Norah, when you taught me to concoct Johnnie-cake, and let me burn the bottom out of your sauce-pans making taffy-candy! I wonder if my new life, with all its grandeur, will be any happier than that?"

She laughed a little, but she also sighed. The fair young face in repose looked worn and drawn, and there

were deep lines across the smooth brow, plowed there by the hard hand of trouble.

"My child!" Norah said, with emotion; "do you know we all thought you dead—all?"

"Yes, I know," very softly, very sadly. "Better so, since I *am* dead to—to every one but you. I know everything, Norah, but I am not sorry for what I have done. The old life is closed forever—I am Mrs. Bartram no more. I am Miss De Montreuil now, and until the end of my days."

"My child—my dear Miss Essie—take care! Do nothing now you may repent of after."

"I will never repent!" She lifted her head, and her face settled into a hard look Norah had never seen there before. "Norah, I am not the girl you knew—not the happy, hopeful, trusting girl who left you—who would have left the wide world, and thought it well lost, for Alwyn Bartram! I have done with hope, and trust, and faith in mankind, forever and ever. I will be happy, if I can; but never again with the happiness that is gone. I have been cruelly and shamefully used, Norah, and if my heart has not been broken, something worse has been done, for it has grown hard and cold as a stone. I have lost something—heart, conscience, I don't know what—but I will never be what I was to my dying day!"

Her voice rang out clear and cold; her pale face turned rigid as marble; her eyes looked straight before her with a hard glitter painful to see.

"If they—Alwyn Bartram and Roysten Darrell—had taken a dagger and stabbed me, they would have done a less cruel and dastardly deed. No, Norah, don't speak, don't advise—it is all of no use. I know everything you can tell me, and more. I know that Roysten Darrell is dead; I know he told the truth before he died; I know that my husband believed when he could doubt no longer; I know he has searched for me far and wide, and used every means man could use to win me back. I dare say he is sorry for the past; I dare say he feels remorse; I dare say he would be very kind and good to me, if I went back. But I never will—never—never—never! I tell you again, I have been cruelly and barbarously used, and I try to forgive. I do forgive both the dead and the living; but I do not forget—and I never will."

"Then you do *not* forgive," said Norah, "for without forgetting, forgiveness means nothing."

"It does in my case. I hope he will be happy—I hope so, Norah. I would make him happy, if I could. But he said things to me—*of* me—that no wife could ever overlook. And he does not care for me—he never did. There was not one spark of affection for me in his heart when he perjured himself by marrying me. He loves as he *can* love, a beautiful and fashionable lady in New York—a married woman, Norah—and she loves him. Do you think I would go back, knowing all this—knowing that duty and remorse, not love, prompted his search? Go back and live with a man whose heart was another woman's—who barely tolerated *me*? Oh, Norah! I am not proud, and I love him dearly—dearly—dearly. But to go back—to be again his wife—Norah, I would *die* first!"

Her pale cheek flushed, her dark eyes flashed. She sat there, gentle Estella Mallory no more, but the haughty daughter of Count De Montreuil, with bright Norman blood beating in her veins—the *sang azuré* of an old and titled race.

"And yet you love him?" Norah said.

"And yet I love him, with a deep and deathless love, as I will love him to my dying day. But to love and *be* loved are two different things. I have left him, and forever! May his life be long and happy, but it will never be shared by me. I have found my father, and *he* loves me, Norah, with a love that will know no change. Why don't you ask me all about it?"

"I am waiting to hear."

"Well," said Estella, "when I ran away, I did not drown myself or take poison, as I fancy many thought. I simply left my husband's house for the house of one of our servants, who had got married some months before, to whom I had been kind, and who I knew would shelter me and be discreet. She was; she took me in, treated me with a kindness and delicacy I can never forget, asked no questions, and answered none of those innumerable advertisements concerning me. What I suffered for the first few months, you or no one else on earth can ever know. I lived through it all—that is enough. I had time to think in those long, lonely weeks, Norah, and I thought, after all, poor Aunt Helen might be mistaken in her hard judg-

ment of my father. At all events, I turned to him in my loneliness and friendliness, and—I wrote him a letter. I told him I had been married; had separated from my husband; that I was poor and alone, and ready to go to him, if he would take me. I told him no names—I begged him never to ask—my heart was too sore, my wounds too recent. If he could take me as I was, well and good; if not, then I must labor for myself. I sent my letter away, and waited. An answer came—a long, loving answer—announcing his speedy arrival to fetch me to France. He came, Norah, three weeks ago. To-morrow we return to New York, to sail immediately for Havre, and—there is my story! I came here to see you, to tell you; but you must keep my secret. All who knew me think me dead. Let them so think. Tell no one—not even Alwyn Bartram. Hark! there is the carriage returning. Dear old Norah, good-bye!"

She put her arms round her neck, with a dry, tearless sob, and clung there.

"Do you remember our last parting, Norah? You warned me then, but I would not be warned. I go from you again, but it is to a father this time, not a bridegroom—and a father's love is different."

"Yes, it is different," Norah said, very sadly. "My poor little Essie! God bless you, my darling, and make you happy, and keep you unspotted from the world!"

"Good-bye, good-bye!"

They were Estella's last words. Norah stood still. The bright vision in gray and blue flitted like a fairy out into the misty moonlight; the tall young man assisted her into the elegant carriage; the black coachman flourished his whip, and the superb black horses pranced away. And as Cinderella, in her magic chariot and golden robes, may have vanished from the admiring eyes of her fairy godmother, so Estella disappeared, to begin her new and brighter life as Count De Montreuil's daughter and heiress.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AFTER TEN YEARS

THE Academy of Music was crowded. The opera that night was "Robert le Diable," and all the *haut-ton* of brilliant New York assembled to hear the Robert of the

evening--a star of European celebrity—with the handsomest face and divinest voice out of Paradise.

The first act of the opera was almost over, as a tall, dark, rather distinguished-looking gentleman lounged into the stalls and took up a bill of the performance.

His broad brow, swarth as a Paynim's, darkened perceptibly as he read the name of the opera, and he flung the harmless strip of paper down, and turned his moody eyes upon the audience.

Two young men, sitting near, attracted his attention. He looked—looked again—then listened involuntarily to their conversation.

The young men were Mr. George Waldron, and a dark-eyed, elegant young Frenchman, a Washington *attaché*, M. Victor de Launey.

"Is your Parisian princess here to-night?" Mr. Waldron was asking, leveling his lorgnette at a particular box. "No, I see her not; and the opera-house is a waste and howling wilderness to half the men present. Will she show, I wonder?"

"Without doubt. She is too impassioned a devotee of music to miss hearing M—— on his first evening. But the goddess of the night arises late, and we, the worshipers, must learn patience. Ah, how it is peerless, how it is radiant, the lovely Estelle!"

"Stricken?" Mr. Waldron said, coolly. "I thought as much. But she's dangerous. Mademoiselle De Montreuil and the goddess Minerva are the only two ladies of my acquaintance born without that uncomfortable appendage—a heart. It is the Princess Frostina, snow-white, beautiful, and snow-cold. To my certain knowledge, she has refused three of the most eligible *partis* of the season, during her five weeks' campaign."

"And to *my* certain knowledge, an English earl and a Russian prince, before she left Paris," De Launey said, stroking his mustache. "It is marble, *mon ami*—it is flint of the hardest—Estelle the Peerless. They talk—those others—of a disappointment in early life as the cause."

"Ah, bah!" George Waldron said, cynically. "Who remembers, in these days, one's first love—least of all, a woman. Look at mademoiselle's cousin, Madame Leonie Rutherford, the brilliant little widow; *she* was in love, madly, infatuatedly, ten years ago—hopelessly, too, since

she was already a wife, and he a husband. She lost him, and look at her, I say, to-day—the lightest-headed, hardest-hearted flirt that ever lured men to destruction. She makes me think, egad! of those weird old stories of Norse sorceresses and German nixies singing men to their fatal doom. She has done the ‘loved-and-lost’ business thoroughly, but she can eat, drink, and be merry as well as the flintiest of us, to-day.”

“She may remember, for all that,” the Frenchman said, pithily. “We don’t wear our heart on our sleeve, in this year of grace eighteen hundred and sixty-six—” He broke off suddenly. “What do you see, *mon cher*, that you wildly stare? The Marble Horseman?”

“By Jove!” Waldron exclaimed, under his breath, “the Marble Horseman would hardly surprise me more! Look at the man on your left, De Launey, sitting like a statue of dark marble! If Alwyn Bartram be alive and in the flesh, that is he.”

The “statue of dark marble” turned around, with a smile. An instant, and George Waldron had started out of his seat, flushed and excited, and was shaking hands with effusion.

“Then it is you, Bartram, and no wraith! And after ten years of exile and wandering and picture-painting, you return at last. The world travels as in a groove nowadays, it seems to me. We always return to the point we started from. Gad! I’d as soon have expected to behold the Grand Turk sitting out the opera as Alwyn Bartram. And when did you return?”

“To-day, in the ‘Europa.’ And happening past here this evening, I dropped in to kill time. Time is my implacable enemy, George. I have spent the past ten years in trying to kill it, but I never succeed.”

“Ah!” said George, “you are a trifle *blasé*, I’m afraid; but never mind—the pure and innocent air of balmy New York will do away with all that, and restore your pristine freshness. And so you have made your mark in the artistic world at last—knocked Guido and Raphael, and the rest of these ancient bricks, into a cocked hat? I’ve read all about it—your wonderful Alpine storms and Venetian sunsets, your Didos, and Cordelias, and Iphigenias, and the rest of ‘em. I always thought it was in you, old fellow.

Permit me to congratulate you! Here, De Launey, let me make you acquainted with my Orestes, Alwyn Bartram."

The gentlemen bowed. George Waldron ran on:

"Have you seen many of the old faces since you landed? But of course you haven't. Well, you couldn't come to a better place than the Academy. I see hosts of old acquaintances of yours on every hand, and—by Jove! Alwyn, there is the oldest, the nearest, the dearest of the lot—the lovely Leonie herself, your old adoration! While we talk of the 'Queen of the Night,' she begins to shine. Yonder is the beauty of the season, our French princess, Mademoiselle De Montreuil."

He raised his glass eagerly; Alwyn Bartram and De Launey did the same. But they were not singular. A fire of lorgnettes was already turned in that direction. Alwyn Bartram looked and saw.

Radiant in jewels and brilliant silk, Leonie Rutherford sat before him—more splendid in her rich, dark, insolent beauty than ever. Ten years had not made her ten hours older; or, if it had, cosmetics, and a French maid, and a dazzling toilet hid it well. The bloom on her cheek was brighter, the fire in her dark, almond-shaped eyes more sparkling, her rich, black hair more soft and abundant, the round fairy form plump as a partridge. Yes, time and the cares of life sat lightly on those graceful shoulders, and ceaseless smiles rippled, and the vivacious black eyes danced like twin sunbeams over the house.

He sat and looked at her—this man who had loved her—whose life she had helped to wreck—who might have been her husband to-day—and not one pulse quickened, not one heart-beat stirred. The gleam in his somber eyes was cold and critical, and not unallied to contempt.

"She wears well," he thought. "Is it nature, or is it art? Has some American Madame Rachel undertaken to make her 'beautiful forever?' Is that damask bloom liquid rouge, and that spotless complexion flake white? Is it all the work of the *femme de chambre*, or the result of a light heart and a peaceful conscience combined with the dead-and-gone Rutherford's rupees?"

His cynical glance left her and rested a second on the tall, white-haired, proud old man who sat beside her—patrician and Frenchman from head to foot—her uncle, the Count De Montreuil, he knew. It left him and rested on the third

occupant of the box, the count's only daughter, heiress, beauty, belle, Mademoiselle Estelle De Montreuil.

Alwyn Bartram looked, and from that instant saw no one else in the house. In that moment one woman of all women on earth arose before him to transform the world. For ten long years his heart had lain cold and still in his breast; not all the beauties of Italy or Spain, or the sunny Rhineland, had quickened its beating by one throb; and now, at sight of a pale girl sitting in an opera-box, it awoke to life once more, with a hot, sudden plunging that sent the dusky blood redly to his face.

She was hardly a girl either; it was a woman of five-and-twenty who sat before him, very simply dressed beside her gorgeous cousin—a white opera-cloak slipping off her shoulders, and white roses in her shining dark-brown hair. A tall and staturesque woman, with a pale, beautiful face, and wonderful yellow-brown eyes, whose peers not all the opium-eaters of Stamboul ever dreamed of. It was a purely Grecian face, the nose, the chin, the mouth, perfect; the delicate cheeks oval; the broad, low forehead like marble. And the dainty head reared itself upon the slender throat with a haughty grace that seemed unconscious, for the rosebud mouth wore an expression unutterably sweet and gentle. And deep in the depths of those pathetic, liquid dark eyes, and around that exquisite mouth, there lay a weary look, the look no face ever wears, save the face of one who has suffered bitterly, and learned endurance after the long, long strife.

"It is the ideal face I have been trying so long to paint, and trying in vain," he said.

"In many earthly forms I vainly sought
The shadow of this idol of my thought."

Your Mademoiselle De Montreuil is rarely beautiful, Waldron. I wonder no longer that Russian princes and haughtier English earls have laid their crowns vainly at her feet. We read of 'women to die for.' I begin to think there must be such things after all—women who can trample on strawberry-leaves."

"I say, Bartram," George remarked, with a queer side glance, "does she remind you of any one you ever knew? That turn of the head, that expression about the mouth, those amber eyes—think?"

But Mr. Bartram had no need to think; the vague resemblance, shadowy, yet strong, had struck him with a quick heart-pang from the first.

"Yes," he said, very gravely, "I see—I understand. And yet Estella was not like that—not in the least like yonder statuesque woman,

"A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
And most divinely fair;"

but the resemblance you speak of is there. She reminds me of my wife."

"The little Rutherford sees us," cried George, animatedly. "Look how she stares! She recognizes you, Alwyn. See 'beauty's bright transient glow' all over her fair face in delighted surprise. Does she wear your fetters still, I wonder? By Jove! she bows and beckons! Let us go!"

"You grow excited," De Launey said, with a Frenchman's shrug. "One would fancy you in the fair Leonie's list of killed, too. But come, the curtain falls and a lady waits. Come, Mr. Bartram, and be presented to the most beautiful woman in New York."

The three young men arose and made their way to the box of the Count De Montreuil. Leonie Rutherford turned eagerly round, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling, her ringed hand outstretched.

"Mr. Bartram!" she exclaimed. "Oh, what a surprise this is! If I had looked and beheld Napoleon III. sitting down yonder, a moment ago, I could hardly have been more astonished. Good-evening, gentlemen," with a laughing nod to the other two, "I will speak to you presently. Estella, let me present my old, old friend, Mr. Alwyn Bartram."

The Count De Montreuil's daughter had not turned round at the opening of the door. She had been glancing carelessly over the house. But at the sound of the name spoken by her cousin, a sudden stillness came over her from head to foot. The smile on her lips seemed to freeze. The words she was speaking to her father died abruptly away. The change was instantaneous—as instantaneously it vanished. When Mrs. Rutherford presented her "old, old friend," mademoiselle, the count's daughter, was ready to bow with easy grace and infinite calmness. Her face was paler than her opera-cloak; but that beautiful face was

always so colorless, that its added pallor now was not noticeable.

M. De Launey bent over Mademoiselle De Montreuil's chair with the nonchalant grace of your thorough Frenchman, talking vivaciously. He was an old acquaintance in Paris, a distant off-shoot of the De Montreuil family, and more intimate with the lovely heiress than any other gentleman alive, excepting her father.

Mr. Waldron stood a little aloof, and looked enviously on, watching, covertly also, the meeting between Leonie and her former flame.

It was a very quiet meeting, on the gentleman's side, at least. Mrs. Rutherford had grown gushing and sentimental with the lapse of years, and was inclined to recall her first love and grow pathetic over it, had Mr. Bartram seconded her lead.

But Mr. Bartram, more like a statue of dark marble than ever, sat among the bright lamps with a face of fixed pallor and gravity—a face strangely stern and cold for that brilliant scene. He was thinking of his lost wife; of that lost wife of whom he had never heard during all those weary years, and of the share this brilliant, hollow-hearted coquette had in driving her from his side. The chief fault was his own, no doubt; but Leonie Rutherford had indirectly been the cause of all.

His heart turned bitter and harder than iron as the past arose before him, and the smiling face hideous in his sight as a death's-head. He glanced away from her, and over at the pale, earnest, beautiful face of the count's daughter. Again that vague resemblance thrilled him through and through.

"There are women, and women," he thought, "Estellas and Leonies, the true and the false. If faces speak the truth, this peerless French woman is as noble as she is lovely. And my wife might have grown like that in these ten years, happily spent. My poor little broken-hearted Essie!"

Mademoiselle De Montreuil raised her eyes as the thought crossed his mind—those great, fathomless eyes of liquid light, and for the third time that sharp pang of resemblance pierced his heart. They *were* alike, his dead wife and this living beauty.

"You look at my handsome cousin," Leonie exclaimed, in the rapid, vivacious way that was her latest rôle. "She

reminds you of— Ah! pardon me. The subject is painful, I know. Very beautiful, is she not? But, *mon Dieu!* colder than snow, more heartless than the goddess with the shield and helmet, and more wise. It is a paragon of frigidity, and piety, and prudence, and all the rest of it. My stately, passionless, perfect cousin. Don't look too much, Monsieur Alwyn. Like that other goddess, Medusa, she is fatal to all who gaze for long."

" Yet mademoiselle does not look merciless," Mr. Bartram said, slowly. " She has a peculiarly gentle face. One would not think a heart of stone lay beneath that tender smile."

" ' She has two eyes so soft and brown,
Take care!
She gives a side glance and looks down,
Beware!
Trust her not, she's fooling thee.' "

Leonie hummed the words by way of answer.

" She is fatal, I tell you! Those tender smiles, those gentle eyes, have lured more of your unhappy sex to their ruin than all the sirens and water-witches in the fabled seas of Faerie. She will smile and look sweet to the end of the chapter, and when you lay your heart at her pretty feet, she will smile and look sweeter than ever, and say, *No*. And the laws of the Medes were more easily altered than that terrible *No*. She has no faith in mankind as lovers or husbands. She is cynical and skeptic to the core. As friends, as ball-room partners, as something sensible to talk to, you do well enough; but as her future husband, no, Mr. Alwyn Bartram. As a friend, I advise you not to look so long at that pale, classical face. My *belle cousine* will never marry."

" No? Rather hard, is it not? And why?"

Leonie laughed a little contemptuously.

" Who knows? Been crossed in love, as the house-maids say, in early life—at least I presume so. There must be a cause for all that bitterness, and she is bitter as death on the subject sometimes. She wears a picture round her neck; if one could only see it, it might tell tales; and she has her anniversary of some great sorrow, or some great joy, for every *New Year's-day* is sacred, and she shuts herself up in her room and sees no one. Her past life is a sealed mystery to me—to her father, too, I think, for she

is intensely secretive. I only met her, you know, two years ago, when I went to Paris. We have been all together since. But, *ciel!* how I chatter, and here the opera ends, and we are due at Madame Campau's ball. You will come to see us, will you not? Ah! don't look so grim, Alwyn. Don't say *no*," with a tender glance. "Remember what old friends we are. I have a thousand things to say to you. You *must* come! Estelle, dearest, indorse my invitation, will you? Monsieur gazes at you imploringly."

Mlle De Montreuil looked up with that rare, bright smile of hers.

"We will be very happy—papa and I—to welcome Mr. Bartram, or any friend of yours, Leonie. Papa, is it not time to go?"

She spoke English perfectly, without the slightest foreign accent, in a voice that somehow suited her face—sweet and silvery. Then the party arose, the count drawing his daughter's arm through his own, Leonie clinging to her old lover, and descended to the carriage.

As it flashed away, he caught a parting glimpse of the two women—Leonie, dark, sparkling, smiling—mademoiselle, pale, quiet, a little grave. But it was that pale, earnest face that haunted his dreams that night—Leonie was forgotten.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"FOR, SOON OR LATE, LOVE IS HIS OWN AVENGER."

"WILL he speak to-night? Will he *ever* speak, I wonder? Has the old love all died out, now that I love him a thousand-fold more than ever? And he knows it, too—surely he must know it. He must see it, if he is not blind. Ten years ago when I refused him, earth held nothing half so dear as Leonie. To-day, when Leonie would give the world for him, he turns cold and hard as iron. And yet—and yet, what does it all mean? Day after day he is here, for the past month; he sits by my side, he turns my music, he haunts us perpetually, and still—he will not speak. Can it be that, like all the rest, my tall, cold-hearted, pale-faced nonette of a cousin has bewitched him with her yellow eyes and grand uplifted ways? He sits by my side, but he looks at her; he

forgets to answer me for listening when *she* speaks; he talks, but it is to ask concerning her. Is it Leonie Rutherford or Estelle De Montreuil that Alwyn Bartram loves?"

Pacing up and down the long, elegant drawing-room of her uncle's handsome house—looking brilliant and elegant herself in a shimmering dinner-dress of rosy silk, and a diamond star ablaze in her black hair—Leonie thought all this.

Outside, the wintery rain beat, and the wintery wind blew; but within, bright lamps, and fragrant flowers, and tropical heat, and velvet and gilding, and carpets and curtains, made a summer picture of warmth and bloom.

She was quite alone in the long, lofty room, walking up and down, with an impatient frown on her low, dusk brow, a compression of impatient pain curving the red, beautiful lips.

• She was looking really gorgeous in her rosy robes, and diamond stars, and rich, dark loveliness—ripe as a pomegranate.

But not all the consciousness of her own beauty would console her to-night; for Leonie Rutherford was deeply in love, and, it seemed, hopelessly. She had always loved him—never more than when, of her own selfish, ambitious will, she had given him up; and now she was free, and he was by her side, and the tables were turned, and "Love was his own avenger."

They were both rich now—poverty could stand between them no more. He was better than rich—famous. She was more ripely beautiful than ever. Both were still young. What, then, should hold them apart now?

She ground her little white teeth with the old trick of impotent rage, as she saw how futile all her efforts were to rekindle the old flame.

"It is Estelle De Montreuil who stands between us," she thought—"that pale, marble-white, marble-cold statue of passionless propriety! She, without blood enough to sin, or love, or hate—who goes placidly on, breaking hearts with her sweet smile and her golden eyes! Bah! I hate her!"

The door opened as the vindictive thought rushed through her mind, and the count's stately daughter swept in. Regally beautiful as ever—the head and shoulders over her petite cousin, and, as usual, very simply dressed. But the

lovely arms and shoulders gleamed, like ivory against bronze, over the golden-brown silk she wore, and the ivy crown on the shining coronal of hair matched well the queenly grace of that proudly uplifted head. She looked what she was—the regal daughter of a long line of aristocrats, in whose veins the blue blood had run unpolluted for many centuries.

"Still alone, Leonie?" she said. "Are not the gentlemen lingering long this evening? What a stupid custom it is, their remaining behind in the dining-room, when they are dying to follow us, and *we*," with a second arch smile, "are dying to have them come! But I suppose papa and Monsieur De Launey linger to talk politics, and Messieurs Bartram, Waldron, and the rest, to discuss high art. We are not supposed to comprehend these serious matters of life, poor imbeciles that we are!"

She threw herself into a fauteuil, the picture of provoking calm, and gazed at her cousin. Leonie made some irritating reply, and kept on her impatient walk.

"Really, Mrs. Rutherford," Mlle. De Montreuil said, calmly, "if it is not absolutely necessary for your health—that vigorous exercise—I wish you would sit down. I have nerves as well as ordinary mortals, and it rather sets them on edge, that feverish march of yours. Was not monsieur, the handsome artist, sufficiently devoted during dinner? or did some one interrupt him on the verge of proposal? As far as I could judge, from my remote seat, he looked distraught, moody. In fact, if he were not an artist—a lion, and the light of your existence, *ma chère*—I should say sulky. What was it—the proverbial eccentricity of genius, or indigestion?"

"When you can talk without sneering, Mademoiselle De Montreuil," Mrs. Rutherford answered, with becoming dignity, "I may answer you. It is accounted clever, I believe, to be able to sneer at the finer feelings of our nature, to be cynical and contemptuous, and all that, but the sneerers are generally soured, I notice, beforehand, and the cynicism but another name for spite and ill-temper."

The count's daughter laughed good-naturedly.

"The finer feelings of your nature! I like that from *you*, Leonie. As my friend Sam Weller remarks, there are so *many* finer feelings that one is puzzled sometimes among them. Don't be cross, Leonie—tell me all about

this old lover of yours, as I am sure you are dying to do. I promise to be all sympathy and attention, and I know, my poor little cousin, secrecy is not your *forte*. Sit down here comfortably, and let me hear the whole story."

"There is nothing to tell," Leonie said, taking the seat, nevertheless; "at least, nothing you have not already heard. We were engaged, over ten years ago, and"—with sudden vehemence—"he is the only man alive I ever loved!"

"And you are the only woman *he* ever loved, I suppose," her cousin suggested. "He looks like a man who might be faithful to an early idol. Strange, then, you are not his wife to-day, *petite*!"

"It is all my own fault," Leonie said, bitterly; "all—from first to last. I loved him, but I loved my pride and vanity more; and, when he lost his uncle's fortune, I left him, too."

"A dastardly act!" said the cold, clear voice of the count's daughter, "and it is the fashion of our gallant old house always to back the losing side. I would not have done it."

"No, I dare say not," retorted the little widow, still more bitterly; "but I don't set up to be such a Princess Perfect as you, Estelle. I left him, and married old Rutherford, and he—he went, and in a fit of desperation wedded a little namby-pamby, bread-and-butter-eating school-girl without beauty or brains."

"A bad bargain," said mademoiselle, with unutterable calm. "Then monsieur is a widower, or separated, like all you Americans—which?"

"Oh, a widower, thank Heaven!" replied Mrs. Rutherford, piously. "She committed suicide, I believe—I told you she had no brains. Though really, in her place, I think I would have done it myself."

"He was unkind to her, then? I confess, I should never think it—he looks sufficiently chivalrous. But one can not judge by looks."

"Well, I don't know; he was not absolutely unkind to her, either—he was only indifferent. He loved me, and he didn't care an iota for her, and she—poor, little, soft-headed simpleton—was madly infatuated with him."

"With her own husband? How ridiculous! It *was* a mad infatuation! As you say, Leonie, she must truly have been a 'soft-headed simpleton.'"

"Sneering again!" exclaimed Leonie, impatiently. "I wish some of your adorers, Miss De Montreuil, who think you but one remove from an angel, could hear how bitter you can be. It might cure them, I fancy. Yes, she was madly infatuated—idolized him, in fact, and was frantically jealous of *me*. And then his cousin came—Robert Bartram—and took his fortune from him, and slandered his wife, and there was a duel, and Alwyn was badly wounded. Romantic, is it not? Well, the wife nursed him devotedly through it, and when he recovered, his first act was to reproach her bitterly and drive her from his side."

"The old story," said mademoiselle—"woman's blind devotion—man's lordly return. And she went to the drug-store, and invested in prussic acid? 'One more unfortunate,' etc."

"I don't know—neither does he, for certain; but it is an assured thing she is dead. The manner of her death is still shrouded in mystery. After her disappearance, Robert Bartram met with an accident that ended his life; but he lived long enough to clear her fair fame from every blot. Then search was made—*such* search—for the missing one, but all in vain. She has never been heard of since."

"It reminds one of the story of the 'Old Oak Chest,'" Estelle said, with a shrug and a smile. "Poor little wife! But then these silly little bread-and-butter eaters—we can afford to spare one of them."

Mrs. Rutherford looked indignantly at her cousin.

"They used to call *me* heartless, Estelle, but they ought to hear you! You are harder than iron—a bitterer old cynic than Diogenes in his tub!"

Again Mlle. De Montreuil smiled unruffled.

"How delightful to find Madame Rutherford in the character of a censor! One would hardly expect it, either. Is your story finished, *petite*? I am going to the piano."

"Almost. Alwyn Bartram left New York, after hunting high and low, and spending oceans of money, and I never set eyes on him since, until that night, a month ago, at the opera. He is the most altered of mankind—so stern, so gloomy, so taciturn. And he used to be fascinating! I could never have believed the loss of a wife he did not love could change him so."

"Blessings brighten as they take their flight! At last, perhaps, he learned to love her."

"Ah, bah! sentimental nonsense! No; it was remorse that prompted the search—nothing more. He never loved her—he never could love her. There was nothing attractive or lovable about her. A plain, pale, awkward country girl! And then, I was there!"

"And he loved you, and does still, without doubt. Very true, Leonie; and yet, I don't envy you. Marry Mr. Bartram if you can; but if the ghost of his dead wife does not rise before you at the altar, then—"

She stopped abruptly, with a laugh at Leonie's angry, scandalized face, and arose.

"What nonsense I talk, don't I, *ma chère*? And yet I have the strongest internal conviction you will never write yourself Mrs. Bartram."

She swept across the room, heedless of Leonie's indignant retort. "Then you mean to marry him yourself, perhaps"—and sat down to the piano.

She was a brilliant performer, and the instrument was superb; but this evening her fingers wandered plaintively over the keys—so softly that the beating of the wintery storm was plainly audible without.

Old memories seemed stirring within her; the beautiful face looked strangely sad, the tender eyes strangely dreamy. Was she thinking of days—this proud daughter of a proud race—very sweet, and gone forever?

All at once she broke into a song—and old, old song—the simplest any one had ever heard the accomplished Mlle. De Montreuil sing:

"On the banks of Allan Water,
When brown autumn spreads its store,
Still was seen the miller's daughter,
But she smiled no more.
For the summer grief had brought her,
And the soldier, false was he,
On the banks of Allan Water,
None so sad as she."

The door opened as she sung; the gentlemen entered, noiselessly, listening, and one stood spell-bound.

Before Alwyn Bartram there arose a vision—evoked by this song, unheard for nearly eleven years—the vision of the little Chelsea parlor, his pale girl-wife singing mournfully to herself in the lonely twilight.

What did this beautiful daughter of the French count mean by looking at him with those dead eyes—by smiling upon him with that lovely, tender smile—by singing the song *she* used to sing?

"Is it retribution?" he thought, with an inward groan.
"Am I never to forget? Is the woman I love to be the avenging ghost of the wife I have lost?"

For it had come to this—he loved Estelle De Montreuil. Leonie's worst fears were rightly founded. Stripped of all sophistry, he loved the count's daughter—this peerless beauty, who refused princes and earls, and scores of untitled worshipers, and sailed on her placid way, serene and coldly bright as the glittering midnight moon.

He loved her without hope, all the more passionately, perhaps, that he was hopeless. The grapes that hung in the sunshine, high above our reach, are always the sweetest. What was he—a disappointed, moody, remorseless man—that this peerless Estelle should stoop from her high estate to give him one tender thought—she whose stately head might have worn a princely crown.

She looked up as she finished the song, and their eyes met—those magnetic, fathomless eyes, whose glances thrilled him to the very soul—the very eyes of the wife he had lost.

Impulsively he started up—crossed over to the piano, while a lovely, fluttering color came and faded in the pale, oval cheeks.

He seldom forced himself upon Mlle. De Montreuil—he was content to worship his goddess afar off; but to-night some impulse stronger than himself forced him to her side. His heart was full—full of her beauty and grace and his own mad love; yet when he spoke his words were as commonplace as words could be.

"I did not think Mademoiselle De Montreuil honored our simple old English ballads so far. It is rare indeed to hear them in these latter days, and yet they are very tender and sweet."

"Mademoiselle De Montreuil does, and has done, many things monsieur does not dream of in his philosophy," she answered, gayly. "I like these old songs, and yet it is nearly eleven years since I sung that before."

He started as if he had been stung, and looked at her earnestly.

What did it mean—this bewildering chain of coincidences? Nearly eleven years, too, since he had heard his wife sing it in the old Chelsea homestead!

A wild, impossible idea flashed through his brain, and set his heart throbbing madly. But a second later he could have laughed aloud at himself in the bitterness of his self-scorn.

"Am I falling into my dotage at eight-and-thirty, that I think such things? Do I expect to live a chapter out of the 'Arabian Nights,' or the 'Castle of Otranto,' or any other romance of wonders? My little, pale-faced, shy-eyed wife, and this superb, haughty, magnificent daughter of the gods, one and the same! Bah! Alwyn Bartram; you have been a fool all your life—you grow a greater fool with every passing year."

The silvery voice—sweet and clear as a crystal bell—recalled him. She looked very gracious and gentle to-night—this uplifted lady, who held all mankind at arm's-length—and the smile in the liquid eyes, on the perfect lips, was inexpressibly fascinating.

He yielded himself to the siren's fatal spell, as in the old days he had yielded to her cousin. The rosy fetters closed tighter and tighter about him. The lion was hopelessly meshed in the golden glitter of her eyes and smiles.

He let himself drift to his fate in very desperation; he yielded to the subtle witchery of voice and smile without one effort to resist.

"Let the worst come!" he thought, with his fatalist's recklessness. "I am equal to either fortune; I will sit in the sunshine while I can; when I am cast forth into the outer darkness, where so many better men have gone before, I will be ready to face the worst; Mademoiselle De Montreuil, 'the refuser,' as they name her, shall have a chance to refuse still another victim speedily. And when it comes, and I know the worst, I can go back to Italy and paint my pictures, and become a misanthrope, and a sneerer, and a woman-hater, like the rest."

All the long evening the artist lingered by the side of the enchantress, with a moody inflexibility worthy of a better cause. And she never once repulsed him. For a wonder, she let herself be monopolized.

She sung for him, played him dreamy sonatas from Mozart, talked to him of Italy, of his art, of his success,

of her good wishes for his future, until the man's heart burned within him. She looked so lovely, so lovable, so gentle, so near a queen with the crown and scepter laid aside, for the time being all his own.

He was beside her—dizzy with his undreamed-of bliss—wishing the golden hours of this enchanted evening could go on forever.

There were others present quite as much astonished by the artist's success as the artist himself—Count De Montreuil among them. He looked in wonder, and pulled his long white mustache in direst perplexity.

What did his Sphinx of a daughter mean by becoming human all at once, after being a marble statue for so many years? Had the Prince come to arouse the Sleeping Beauty, when he had given the prince over as a hopeless myth? And was this black-browed, stern-looking, gloomy young man, who talked little and smiled less, the magician that was to change his beautiful Estelle from marble to flesh?

“Sacre bleu!” the old Napoleonist thought, knitting his silvery brows. “It passes one's comprehension! I never saw her half so gracious before, with the best men of the empire at her feet. That mythical husband in the background, of whom she told me ten years ago—does this man remind her of him? or is it the man himself? Ah, bah! who can comprehend a woman?”

And Leonie? But Leonie was not one to yield without a struggle. Like all the De Montreuls, she was ready to fight until the last gasp. At first her black eyes had flashed amazed and indignant fire. What did Estelle De Montreuil mean by taking possession of *her* property?

Then she sat still and waited, her cheeks still flushed and eyes still flashing, and lips ominously compressed. And under her very nose the flirtation still went on.

Then she rose, great with the occasion, and marched resolutely to the rescue, bent on reclaiming her slave, or dying in the struggle.

But she failed—signally failed. The plainest kitchen-maid in the area regions could hardly have been ignored more effectually. Mlle. De Montreuil was determined on keeping her captive, and, alas for Leonie! that captive was but too willing. She struggled bravely to the last, but to the last in vain. His parting word, his parting

glance, his last hand-clasp—all, all were for Estelle! He hardly knew she was in the room.

"Woe to the vanquished!" George Waldron solemnly said in her ear. "All is lost but honor!"

They were gone—the drawing-room was deserted. With blazing eyes the small virago turned upon her tall cousin; but mademoiselle had ignominiously fled. "Conscience makes cowards of us all." She was not prepared to face her much-injured cousin just then.

Up in her luxurious room, the light burning low, the rain and sleet lashing the windows, Estelle knelt, her face hidden in her hands, her heart throbbing tumultuously.

"At last," that impassioned heart cried—"at last the crowning hour of my life has come! He loves me as he never loved her! At last, at last, he is *mine!*"

In another room near, equally luxurious, brilliantly lighted, the gorgeous widow walked up and down, nearly frantic with rage and jealousy, impotent love and despair.

"I am no more to him than the commonest vagrant that walks the streets; if I were dead to-morrow it would not cause him one pang. He is all hers; he loves her as he never loved me in his life. And I might have been his happy wife to-day if I had so chosen—miserable, selfish fool that I have been."

And in *his* room, Alwyn Bartram gazed upon a painted face—the beautiful face of his idol—as a devotee might upon his patron saint, with a rapt, ecstatic gaze.

"If the world were mine, I would lay it at her feet!" he thought. "Does earth hold another like her—so beautiful, so noble, so true? My peerless love, the crowning madness of my life—when I tell you how devotedly I worship you—must come very soon! My love is too strong for one heart to hold!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"COME WHAT WILL, I HAVE BEEN BLESSED."

ALWYN BARTRAM had returned to New York; why, he could hardly have told you himself. The past ten years had drifted dreamily away in Italy, and he had won a name among the immortals. His pictures were lauded to the skies, and he wrote his name high among the Academicians.

But absence had not brought forgetfulness, nor success content. That chronic remorse for his past misdeeds haunted him still.

In the lone watches of the long, still nights, the pale, reproachful face of his wife rose out of the silvery Italian moonlight, unspeakably pallid and sad—an avenging ghost. He could not forget her; he could not forget the miserable uncertainty that wrapped her end.

It was some vague hope that a second search might evoke something to lighten the darkness that had brought him back; but on the first night of his return, Estelle De Montreuil had arisen before him to transform his life. And since that night, his existence had been one long dream of her.

He sat dreaming of her still, while thinking bitterly and self-reproachfully of the wasted weeks in which not one effort had been made. He sat among the brilliant lights, and flowers, and gay faces, dark and *distract* as usual—wrapped in moodiness as in a mantle—a gloomy specter at the feast.

Once again the scene was Count De Montreuil's lofty drawing-room; the time, three nights after that memorable dinner-party. It was a musical reunion, and fair women and brave men mustered strong, and fairest among them, as the moon among stars, moved the queenly daughter of the Parisian count.

Alwyn Bartram sat listening to the music, that was all meaningless crash and uproar except when *she* sung. By his side sat Leonie, looking brilliantly, as usual, dressed to perfection, and lavishing upon the gloomy ingrate by her side all the sweetness of her bewitching glances and smiles.

I think his very moodiness—his “Count Lara” gloom, had an irresistible fascination of its own, making him more like a banished prince than an every-day Christian.

But ascetic St. Kevin, on his rocky perch, never turned a deafer ear to the fascinations of the lovely Cathleen, than Alwyn Bartram to the witching wiles of his early love.

He arose, at last, almost rudely—she had held him captive for over an hour—and, without one word of excuse or apology, quitted her side.

Mrs. Rutherford looked after him, with pale face and

ominously flashing eyes. Had it been the days of the *Borgia*, that look might have sealed his doom.

She saw him pause at the curtained entrance of a tiny boudoir opening out of the drawing-room, hesitate an instant, then enter. She looked round for her cousin; she was nowhere to be seen.

"She is there," the little widow thought, compressing her lips, "and he has gone to tell her, what he has told me a thousand times, that he loves her. Well, when she refuses him, perhaps he will return to me, and I love him so dearly that I would accept him even then."

Mrs. Rutherford had guessed aright—Estelle was in the boudoir, and alone. In passing he had caught sight of that tall, majestic figure, to be known by its stately grace among ten thousand, and he had entered at once.

She was standing gazing dreamily out at the wintery moonlight, coldly bright on the glittering snow. At the sound of his entrance she turned to greet him with a brightly welcoming smile.

"At length, Mr. Bartram," she said, gayly, "you are civil enough to come and speak to me. This is the first time to-night, is it not?"

"You were at the piano when I came in, and surrounded, as usual. I would not disturb you, of course, and yet I have something very particular to say to you to-night, Mademoiselle De Montreuil."

"Indeed!" She said it lightly, but her heart gave one great bound, and then seemed suddenly to stop beating. "Is it that you return to Italy speedily? Mr. Waldron has anticipated you—he told me to-day."

"I return to Italy, mademoiselle—yes, and very soon; never, in all mortal probability, to return. And before I go you must hear all my folly—all my madness—all my presumption; for, Estelle De Montreuil, I have lifted my eyes where scores of worthier men have lifted *theirs* in vain—to your peerless face—and I love you!"

The murder was out. He folded his arms, stood drawn up to his full height, his black eyes glowing, his lips set—a lover precious grim.

"No one can know more fully than I do, mademoiselle, how insane my infatuation is. I know that you have refused the highest titles of the old world—rejected men whom all the earth delights to honor. But not one among them

ever worshiped you with the passionate adoration that fills my heart. When I tell you I would die for your sake, the words are poor and weak; but, Estelle, I *would!* I love you as I never loved woman, as I never will love again. If I dared ask you for love in return, your answer would be *No*. Even *my* madness is confident of that."

He stopped, his dark face rigid as stone, the chest under his folded arms heaving—a strong heart in strong agony. She had not moved once; she stood looking steadily out at the moonlit snow, not whiter than her perfect face. But now she turned suddenly, her whole countenance lighting up with some inward fire, as he had never seen it light before.

" You are sure I will say *No*," she repeated. " Oh, Alwyn! have you never thought I might say *Yes*? "

" Mademoiselle!" he turned upon her, his face ghastly, his voice hoarse, " for God's sake don't stoop to trifles with me! Refuse me if you will, but be merciful. I am a fool and a madman, but try to pity and spare!"

She smiled, holding out both white hands.

" You are bent on having *No*, I see. Well, my sex are all contrary—I will not say it. Alwyn Bartram, you have been blind instead of mad, or you would have known long ago that—I love you!"

He absolutely staggered back, so intense was the shock—the surprise. Never for one instant had he dared dream of such bliss as this.

" Love me!" he repeated, bewildered. " *You*, Estelle, love me?"

" With my whole heart. Oh, Alwyn, so dearly—so long!"

Her head drooped upon his shoulder, her voice was lost in a sob. All her strong self-reliance fell away; the weary years dropped from between them—the old time came back with an ecstasy that was almost pain.

He realized it at last—his crown of life was won; he had succeeded where every one else had failed. The "Refuser" was his. He caught her and strained her to him with a joy that made him half frantic, half delirious—that left him speechless. But she extricated herself, and at once.

" That will do," she said, with a smile. " No need to prove the strength of your affection by such Bruin-like embraces. And some one may enter. Pray sit down here

comfortably, Mr. Bartram and drop that dazed and ecstatic face. One would think some wonderful piece of good fortune had befallen you."

"Earth holds no other fortune half so good, half so great. Oh, Estelle, I *can not* realize it. You love me—you? My darling, if I am not dreaming, say it again."

But Mlle. De Montreuil only looked at him saucily.

"How passionately monsieur makes love—like a very hero of romance! But then the practice! Used you to talk to Leonie like this, sir?"

"Ah, you know that old folly, of course. And that reminds me, Estelle, of the miserable story of the past—the story you must hear."

"I think I have heard it already—it is of your wife. Leonie told me."

"But not one half my cold-blooded cruelty—she could not. I have been the greatest wretch alive; I broke the most trusting, the tenderest heart—" He stopped short, his voice hoarse. "Not even to you, Estelle, can I talk of this. I drove from my side the most devoted wife ever man was blessed with—drove her to her death."

"How did she die?" Estelle De Montreuil asked, a tremor in her clear tones.

"I do not know. All is wrapped in miserable uncertainty."

And then he began and passionately poured forth the whole story—his early infatuation for Leonie—his loss of fortune—her marriage—his own—the story of Robert Bartram—the strong evidence—his belief in his wife's guilt—the duel—the dying man's vindication—his fruitless search—his undying repentance and remorse.

The count's daughter listened to it all, her lovely face very pale, her large, dark eyes fixed on the carpet. She raised them, as he finished, full to his face.

"Then, Mr. Bartram, you do not know whether your wife is alive or dead?"

"I *do* know. She is dead. All hope that she might be alive ended long ago. The search I made was long and thorough. If she were alive, she *must* have been found. No; Estella is dead. She will never stand between us, poor child!"

"And yet I am not convinced. She *may* be alive. Fancy, Mr. Bartram, on our wedding-day, your first wife

appearing to stop the ceremony! I have read of such things often."

"For Heaven's sake, Estelle, don't raise *that* as an objection!" he exclaimed, impetuously. "I tell you it is impossible. She is surely dead. And yet, if you wish to make conviction certainty, I will begin the search over again—I will leave no stone unturned to trace her fate."

"And if you find her?" she slowly said.

"I will *never* find her—I will not admit such a possibility."

"Because you do not wish to do so. If you found her to-morrow, it would be the old story over again, with *me* for rival, instead of my cousin Leonie."

"No," Alwyn Bartram said, earnestly, "I trust not—I think not. Dearly as I love you, Estelle—and you can never know how dearly—I should leave you forever, and try to do my duty by her. Happiness I would never know apart from you, but I would never willfully look upon your face again—never willfully admit a thought of you into the heart that should be my wife's. But I pray God that I may never be put to the test. Estella is happy in heaven. Oh, my love, let me be happy on earth with you!"

Again she gave him her hand; again the light of her enchanting smile shone full upon him.

"You shall. If I may not call you husband, I shall go to my grave Estelle De Montreuil! But you must search for your lost wife; you must make conviction doubly sure. Take the next six months, Alwyn, and devote them to the search. I do not tell you to use every human means to discover her, if by any possibility she be still alive. I know you will do that. If, at the end of six months, nothing has been discovered, then come to Estelle and claim her as your own."

"My darling!" He lifted the slender hand to his lips in a dizzy trance of joy. "And meantime is the world to know of this?"

"The world may guess, if it will; you and I will tell it nothing. But, monsieur, are you quite sure—quite certain that the heart you offer me holds no other lodger? Has Madame Rutherford no tiny corner of what she once possessed completely? Is it all my own? Remember, we De Montreuls are a race who brook no rivals."

"You have none; heart and soul I am all yours! I only

wish I could offer you what you so nobly give me, my peerless love—a heart that *never* before held another image!"

She looked at him with gravely earnest eyes.

"That is your mistake, monsieur. Permit me to rectify it. My heart *has* held another image. Eleven years ago I was as passionately, as infatuatedly in love as it is possible for any romantic girl of seventeen to be. I am eight-and-twenty now, monsieur, and many men have loved me, or said so, but until to-night they have told me in vain; for the man I loved so strongly and impetuously well-nigh broke my heart, and all those years have scarcely healed the wound. I loved him very dearly, and he—monsieur, I was no more to him than the dirt under his feet."

The artist listened in pale surprise.

"He was a brute—an idiot—a blind, besotted imbecile! Good heavens! that the man should exist whom *you* could love in vain! But you have forgotten this cold-blooded ingrate—you love only me?"

"Only you," with her most radiant smile. "Have I not said so? And now that we have made our mutual confession and settled our future plans, suppose we return to the drawing-room? They will certainly miss us, and—who knows?—they may guess the truth. We will find Leonie looking carving-knives and strychnine, I am positive. Come!"

Without waiting for him, she glided away, with a last brilliant glance and smile, and mingled calmly with her guests.

But he did not follow immediately. He lingered behind, to try and realize his supreme bliss—to try and still the mad throbbing of his undisciplined heart.

He tried in vain; for when he came forth, his worn, dark face told his joyful tale to all beholders, glowing with inward delight.

"Gad!" said George Waldron, pulling his mustache meditatively, "Bartram's been hoisted to the seventh heaven since he went into that little room. Look, Mrs. Rutherford—look at that ecstatic face! Your cousin was in there, too. Do you suppose that she has had anything to do with it? He may have proposed—I have seen it coming for some days past—and she may have refused;

but the killed and wounded of the dazzling Estelle don't generally look like that. And she refuses every one, of course."

"I don't perceive the 'of course,'" Leonie answered, spitefully. "Mr. Bartram is not accustomed to hear No."

"He heard it once, though, didn't he? Oh, you have very much to answer for, Mrs. Rutherford! And you think she may possibly have said Yes? And I had made up my mind that she was going to live and die one of the vestal virgins. She refuses a Russian prince and an English earl, and hosts of counts and marquises, and, I dare say, if I asked her, she would refuse *me*; and here she accepts Alwyn Bartram at the first word! But it always was that beggar's luck, with his jaundiced complexion, and black whiskers, and gloomy, brigandish air. You women like that sort of thing, don't you?—the Edgar Ravenswood style, you know. It's a pleasant combination of liver complaint and indigestion, but the yellower and sulkier a man looks the safer he is to be adored by the whole sex."

Mrs. Rutherford had heard very little of this plaintive reproach. Her black eyes were lightening dangerously, her white teeth were vindictively set, as she followed Alwyn Bartram, with a passionate, yearning glance. She had lost him forever.

She saw him join her rival before her eyes; she saw the happy light that transformed his handsome face; she saw Estelle make place for him beside her, with a shy, glad smile.

"She has accepted him!" she hissed; "she will be his wife. They have settled it all!"

"Ah, very likely!" drawled Mr. Waldron, sauntering away. "But before she becomes Mrs. Bartram the second, hadn't your brilliant cousin better make sure Mrs. Bartram the first is dead and done for? Whisper in her pretty ear, Leonie, the motto of the fierce Kirkpatrick, when he brandished his terrible claymore over the bleeding Red Comyn, '*I mak siker.*'"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FALL OF THE THUNDER-BOLT.

THE search began—brisk and thorough. Money flowed like water through Mr. Bartram's fingers; the best detect-

ives in New York were again on the trail, lost over ten years ago; no stone was left unturned. He worked himself with the best of them. He went once more to Chelsea—once more he sought out Norah Styles in her spinster retreat. But he might as well have appealed to the Sphinx as to the stony-faced vestal who grimly confronted him.

"I know nothing whatsoever of your wife, Mr. Alwyn Bartram," she said, inflexibly; "and if I did I wouldn't tell you. There!"

He returned to New York. Was he disappointed? Did he really wish to find Estella? Not for one instant did he play hypocrite—to himself, or the woman he loved, by pretending to answer yes. He had no wish to find her alive—he had never loved her, it was hardly likely he could begin now. But he *did* wish to clear up the mystery that shrouded her fate—to know, when his lovely Estelle laid her hand in his for life, that no other woman on the wide earth had a stronger claim upon him than she.

The weeks went by, the months strung themselves out—three had gone. Spring was coming, and the Count De Montreuil was beginning to look wistfully at his idolized daughter, and talk of returning to Paris.

She had been so restless all the ten years he had known her that this new content of hers puzzled him strangely. Like the rest of the world, he saw the darkly handsome artist ever by her side, and ever most welcome there, and he could hardly be blind to what was so plain.

"She has fallen in love at last," he said to himself, with a shrug, "and with this American artist. She will marry him, I dare say; but I wish she would return to Paris first. I grow tired of this New York."

He spoke his wishes aloud at last, and, to his surprise, Estelle acquiesced at once.

"Very well, papa," she said; "it shall be as you wish. I will prepare for departure immediately."

Alwyn Bartram heard the news with dismay.

"At least I may accompany you," he pleaded. "The search can go on as well without me. I can not live apart from you, Estelle!"

Miss De Montreuil shook her head resolutely.

"You must stay behind until the six months have fully expired—then come. Be patient, Alwyn; it is but little over two months now."

"An eternity—separated from you! Don't be merciless, Estelle."

But Estelle *was* merciless on this point, and at last the despairing lover had to yield.

"And how soon do you go?" he asked.

"In a fortnight, at most. Like your true-born Parisian, papa is in purgatory when not in Paris. And, when you reach France, *you* shall play suzerain and I vassal. Be content and wait."

He lingered long that evening, with a strange reluctance to leave her. Never had she been so gentle, so sweet, so lovely, so surely his own. He lingered late, and walked home, through the April moonlight, in the blissful trance that was his normal state now.

The gas burned low in his room when he entered, whistling gayly a popular air, and he saw a letter lying awaiting him on the table. He turned it up, lifted the letter, and glanced carelessly at the superscription. On the instant he staggered back, with a strong cry, holding it from him, his dark face blanching to an awful leaden white from brow to chin; for it was in the handwriting of his lost wife—the round, school-girlish hand he remembered so well, and there in the corner were her initials.

He stood paralyzed—his face livid, his eyes starting, gazing upon it as though it had been a death's-head. Then, in a passion of sudden fury, he tore it open and devoured its brief contents:

"MY HUSBAND,—I live. Years ago, no doubt, you gave me up for dead. I never meant to undeceive you—I never meant to address a word or a line to you again. Though I were dying of hunger at your door, I never meant to lift my eyes to your face and ask a crumb from you. I know who you have searched for me—I know that after ten years you have returned, and are searching for me again. I know your motive, too—you wish to marry again. You love another woman, as you once loved Leonie Rutherford—you wish to obtain proof of my death, and make her your wife. You never cared for me; when you read this, and know I live, and stand between you and your idol a second time, you will hate me. Be it so—I will still do my duty. My only crime in the past, my only crime in the present, is loving you too well. A broken heart, a ruined life—all

the wrong and misery of the past—have not been strong enough to conquer that love. But you can not marry this other woman—this French heiress—for I, your lawful wife, before God and man, still live. I break my ten years silence to warn you. You need not fear me. I will never appear before you or her—never interfere with you in any way save this. But you will not do *her*, since you love her, so great a wrong. Remember, though the laws of the land may set you free, who has said, ‘He that putteth away his wife and taketh another committeth adultery.’ I do not reproach you for the past—I ask nothing for the future from the husband who never loved me; but if you have any mercy for me, or this woman you wish to wed, then tell her all, and leave her. Tell her your wife still lives—the wife you detest, but yours still—the wife who may never look upon your face until you meet her at the Judgment Seat, but who now, as then, will still claim you for her husband, in life and in death.

“ESTELLA BARTRAM.”

He dropped the letter. His face fell forward on the table, with one long, unearthly groan. It was the bitter wail of a soul in its last fierce death-throe. Then he lay still.

The hours went on; the night passed; the morning came. He had never stirred; he lay there, like a dead man, wrestling in his own strong heart with his strong agony. The worst had come: he had lost her—his beautiful Estelle—the light of his life—his bride. The April morning broke jubilant and bright. The sparkling sunshine filled his room; the busy city woke up; its noise, its life, was astir around him.

He lifted his head at last, and you saw that the battle was fought and the bitter victory won. His face was set in an awful calm, but the agony of this one night had left it worn, and haggard, and hollow-eyed.

Passion and duty had battled fiercely, but duty had won the day. His wife lived, and Estelle De Montreuil was as dead to him as though she lay in her coffin.

He drew forth his watch; it was past nine. He arose and shook himself, as though he threw off a burden, and made a careful toilet, with dull, mechanical precision.

Civilization has its minor uses, too. Our hearts may

break, but our dress, when we face our brother man, must not be disordered. The days for sackcloth and ashes and wailing aloud over our dead have gone by.

He had lost all that made life worth having; in a sunlit sea his one bark of hope had gone headlong down forever, but when he went forth into the busy outer world, it would have been a close observer who could have read the tale of the dreary wreck in his set, somber face.

He found Mlle. De Montreuil at home, alone, and at leisure. She stood by the window of the sunshiny morning-room, amid her roses and geraniums, and canary birds, in a crisp muslin robe, with azure ribbons fluttering about her, and rose-geranium leaves in her velvet hair. She stood fresh, and bright, and beautiful in her glorious womanhood—a “queen of noble nature’s crowning”—and she turned to greet him with outstretched hand, and a smile before whose cloudless radiance the sunshine paled.

“How delightfully early monsieur comes! Of course you have not breakfasted? I am waiting impatiently for the bell, for I am most unromantically hungry. But, Alwyn,” in quick alarm, “something has happened, surely. How strangely you look!”

“Something has happened,” he said, in a voice steady and deep—“something that in one brief night has changed me from the most blessed to the most miserable of men. Read this—it will tell you all.”

He handed her the fatal letter. She took it, turned slowly away from him to the window, and read it from beginning to end.

Her hand dropped heavily by her side; dead silence fell. He stood near her, but he could not see her face; it was averted, and her whole body was rigid and still.

“For God’s sake, speak to me!” he broke out, passionately. “Say one word, Estelle. Your silence drives me mad!”

She turned slowly round, the letter still in her hand, her face very pale, her eyes glittering and quite dry. But the voice that answered him had lost the clear, silvery ring that made its contralto tones like liquid music.

“I have known it from the first. I have felt it here,” tapping lightly on her dainty corsage. “Our dream has been very sweet, Alwyn, but it must end.”

He turned from her with a sort of fierce cry—the un-

earthly sound of a wild animal goaded to madness by intolerable pain.

"It is easy for you—you, who are an angel; but for me—for me, with a man's rebellious, passionate heart—Oh, Estelle, my love, my life! I *can not* give you up!"

She covered her face, trembling all over at the frantic anguish of that cry.

"She should not have spoken!" he broke out incoherently. "She has been as dead for the past ten years; she should have remained dead to me to the end. What right has she to stand between me and my heavenly dream of bliss? I never cared for her, and she knows it. How dare she interfere now?"

"She is your wife."

The sweet, sad voice, mournful and low, fell on his fierce spirit as the harp of David on the fury of Saul, the king. She said no more, and a long silence fell.

Vehemently he paced up and down; cold and pale she stood, looking out at the mocking sunshine. Her soft, tender tones again were first to break the spell.

"She is your wife—your much-wronged, long-suffering wife. You will go to her, Alwyn, will you not? Think how long and how dearly she has loved you!" Her voice trembled. "Oh, surely such devotion as hers deserves some reward!"

"You are right!" He stopped suddenly in his excited walk. "You are my good angel now, as ever. I saw my duty clear and plain last night, through all the passionate struggle of love and despair that well-nigh drove me mad, and I resolved to follow it. But the sight of you, this morning, awoke all my madness again. My poor Estella!" He leaned against the window, his arms folded over his heaving chest, his colorless face full of untold despair. "She deserves a better fate than to share such a wrecked life as mine!"

"Then you will seek her out, and at once?"

"Yes," he said, drearily; "it is all that is left me to do now. I will seek her out; I will take her back to Italy, and, Heaven helping me, I will do my best to atone for the past. Happiness I will never know again. Your face, my Estelle, will lie on my heart to my dying day; but when we part here, I will never willfully look upon it

again. For you—you will forget me, and bless the life of a better man."

He stopped abruptly, and turned away.

And very clear and sweet the low voice of Estelle De Montreuil replied:

"I told you once, and I tell you again, I will never call earthly man husband, if I may not call you. As I love you now, I will love you all my life. My best wishes and prayers for your happiness will be with you while this heart beats."

Again silence. Alwyn Bartram could not speak, but the dark, despairing eyes looking out at the street were burning and dry.

"You will seek your wife at once," Estelle said, softly. "She gives her address, I see, at the end of the letter. Here it is, and"—a momentary hesitation—"when you see her—when all is explained—when you are reunited—you will come and say good-bye to me? I am miserably weak, but I—I want to see you once again."

"I will come," he answered, hoarsely—"once more, and for the last time. Until then—"

He turned away abruptly. A second later, and the street-door closed after him; another second, and the breakfast-bell, for which mademoiselle, half an hour ago, had been waiting so impatiently, rang; but mademoiselle did not descend. Mrs. Rutherford breakfasted alone, and her cousin hid herself in her room the livelong day.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PAST REDEEMED.

It was a forlorn tenement house, away down by the East River, and the afternoon light was low in the red west when Alwyn Bartram reached it. He had been there before, and on the very threshold, with a strange inconsistency, his feet had turned away.

It would have been easier for him to have led a forlorn hope, amid the deadly belching of cannon, than to stand face to face once more with his unloved, his much-wronged wife.

He made his way up the dreary staircase, dark already, along the dreary passages, and stopped at the room a little slip-shod girl (his cicerone) pointed out.

"The lady lives here," she said. "Knock loud, for mother says she's sick, and may be she's asleep."

He stood a moment after the slip-shod fairy had bounded away, then lifted his hand, and knocked heavily.

An instant, and the door was opened by a poorly dressed woman with a baby in her arms.

"Mrs. Bartram lives here?" he said, slowly.

"Yes, sir," the woman answered, "she's here. Will you walk in? She's poorly, and she's lying down, but she's awake."

He followed her in, his heart beating like a muffled drum. The twilight filled the room; a dull red fire glowed in the grate, diffusing heat, but little light. On a lounge, in front of this fire, wrapped in a large shawl, half buried amid pillows, lay a female figure—his wife!

"I'll step down-stairs, Mrs. Bartram," the woman said, "while you talk to the gentleman. Do you want the lamp lighted?"

"No," said a stifled voice from among the pillows. "There is light enough. I will knock on the floor when I want you, Mrs. Gray."

Estella's very voice! And after all these weary years, these commonplace words were the first he heard her speak.

The woman left the room and closed the door. Then, Mr. Bartram, standing motionless like some tall, black ghost, advanced and knelt down beside the lounge.

"Estella," he said, huskily, "after all these years—at last! And this is how I find you—poor, and ill, and alone. How shall I answer to God and man for the wrong I have done you?"

She covered her face with her hands. He could hear her sobbing; he could see the tears that fell like rain.

"Only forgive me!" she said, in the same stifled voice. "Do not altogether hate me for what I have done! Oh, Alwyn, I have suffered bitterly since we parted, but the thought that I must again stand between you and happiness—the thought that you may learn to hate me—has been the bitterest suffering of all."

"My poor little Essie!" He drew her hands from before her face and tried to see it. "Let me look at you—let me see once more the faithful, loving face—always so tender, so true. And you love me still, my poor little wife—I who have been the greatest villain on earth to you?"

"My husband," her hand slipped into his, and held it close, "when I cease to love you I shall be dead."

He drew her to him, and kissed the pale face he could hardly see—his heart too full at the moment for words.

"It was hard to have to write that letter," she whispered; "but I could not let you commit that crime, Alwyn. Oh, my darling!" clasping him close, "say you forgive me for what I have done!"

"I forgive *you*—you who have done no wrong? You mock me, Estella! The only thing I find it hard to forgive is your long silence. Why could you not be merciful and speak before, Essie?"

She sighed drearily.

"I was so worn out, so heartsick, all faith, and trust, and hope, dead! I could not have undergone it again. And—you did not love me. You had no faith in me, no love for me; you sought me from a hard sense of duty, and—I could not go. Don't let us speak of it—don't let us speak of the past—I could not bear it. Yet it is very good of you to come here; but you must not come again. Let me go my own way—I will never interfere with you more—and try to be happy with your art. Go back to Italy—I know you have been there—and try to forget the great mistake of your life—your marriage with me."

She disengaged herself from him, and half sat up, speaking firmly, steadily. For one second of time the arch-tempter whispered, "Take her at her word—your life linked to her will be that of the galley-slave, a burden to both." But it was only for a second.

"Never," he said, steadily, "so help me Heaven! My wife shall go with me wherever I go—never on earth to part again! Oh, Estella, I have been a wretch, a scoundrel, in the past, but with all my might I will strive to atone now. Let me redeem that miserable past—let me devote my whole future life to you. Forgive and forget what is gone, my tender-hearted little Essie, and all that the most devoted husband ever was to his wife I will strive to be to you."

There was a little pause, then—

"Will you promise to love me?" she asked, softly.

"I promise. I haven't—I don't—but I will! Who could help loving—in time—a wife so sweet, so patient, so long-suffering, so true?"

"And Mrs. Rutherford," Estella said, abruptly; "is *she* quite forgotten?"

"Quite—long and many a year ago. When I lost you, I ceased to care for her."

"And this other—her cousin—you *do* love her?"

She could feel the strong shudder that shook him from head to foot.

"For pity's sake, Estella, don't let us speak of *that!* Take me for what I am; but not even to you, least of all to you, can I speak of *her*. Let me forget if I can—she is dead to me from this day. If I had only known you lived before I met her!"

The strong passion of that suppressed cry thrilled her to the heart.

"I am sorry—I am sorry! Oh, Alwyn, perhaps it might have been better if I had never written that letter!"

"No!" he said, steadily, "a thousand times no! Right is right—you did what you should have done, Estella. Don't fear for me—I will forget her, *if I can*—my wife, I trust, will have my whole heart. I will see her once again to say farewell—then, Estella, I will cease to remember there is another woman on earth but yourself. You will leave this wretched place at once—you will come with me now, will you not?"

"You are very good; but, Alwyn, you will repent."

"Never! Trust me, my wife, all unworthy as I am. Trust me, as you have forgiven me—you shall never regret it again. You will come with me immediately, then? I can not talk to you—I can not endure to see you—in this wretched place."

"Not to-night," Estella answered. "I can not go at once. Give me till to-morrow—you shall know why later. Come for me, if you will, the day after. And now I will send you away. I am not very strong, as you see, and this interview has worn me out."

He kissed the pale forehead and arose at once.

"You have not even let me see you, Essie, and after ten—nay, eleven long years of parting."

"Ah, *that* will come all too soon. Think what sad changes ten years of loneliness, and poverty, and labor, must work, and don't come back—don't ever ask to see *me*. The contrast between me and—*her* will be too cruel."

Again that shiver shook him—any allusion to the lovely bride he had lost brought with it the bitterness of death.

"The day after to-morrow I will call for you," he said, briefly. "Good-night, Estella, since you will it so, and take care of yourself for my sake—until then."

He lifted her hand to his lips. A moment later, and he was gone.

Straight through the silvery spring twilight, he went to the house of Count De Montreuil. He never stopped to think.

"Since it *must* be, 'twere well done quickly," he muttered, between set white teeth. "Let me say farewell at once, and tear her image out of my heart forever, if I can. Ah, '*if I can*'—so easy to say, so terribly hard to do!"

He reached the house, rang the bell, and was admitted at once. Mlle. de Montreuil was in the library and alone, and to the library at once he strode.

He paused a moment on the threshold to take in the picture—a picture never to be forgotten. She lay back in a great carved and gilded chair, the gas-light flooding her with soft glory, her bright silk dress shimmering and flashing, misty lace fluttering and jewels sparkling about her. She was reading, but she dropped her book and rose up quickly as she saw him. How dazzlingly beautiful she looked, now that he had lost her forever! And he was an artist, with all an artist's passion for the beautiful and the luxurious. He thought of the scene he had left, not an hour ago, and the contrast, as his wife had said, was indeed cruel.

"Well," Miss De Montreuil breathed, "you have seen her?"

"I have seen her."

He advanced, and leaned heavily against the marble mantel. In the hush that fell between them, he could hear Leonie in the drawing-room, touching the piano softly and plaintively, and the words of her melancholy song, "Love not! love not! oh, hapless sons of clay!"

"Then nothing remains for us but to shake hands and part," Estelle De Montreuil said, in a steady voice. "You have my best wishes for your happiness, Mr. Bartram."

The name stung him—it had always been Alwyn of late. But these little things were only part of the dull despair at his heart.

" You are very good," he said, without looking at her. " I have come straight from her to you. I found her poor, and sick, and alone. The story of the past ten years she has not told me, but I can guess what it must have been. She has forgiven me—she loves me still—I can say no more. I told her I would see you this once and never again, and I will keep my word."

He did not lift his head—his arm was thrown over the mantel, he leaned heavily against it, his face white and drawn. She drew a long, shivering breath, then went up close to him.

" You will devote your life to her—you will forget our brief dream? You will make her happy—you will redeem the past?"

" God helping me, I will!"

" And I," Estelle said, very gently, very sadly, " will pray for you both. Some day, years and years from this, when your heart is all hers, when I am but a memory and a shadow, we may meet and laugh over our old folly. Our heads may be silvered, our faces withered and old, but the time will come."

" The time will never come." He lifted his head, and his strong, dark eyes met hers full and clear. " Never, and you know it! I will do my duty by my wife, but *you* I will never forget! But with you it is different—young, and beautiful, and free, the image of the man who so wretchedly lost you need not blight your life. We may meet when you are a happy wife—not before."

" Then we will never meet," she answered, quietly. " I am a De Montreuil, and I keep my word. Good-bye, Alwyn Bartram," she held out her white hand, " and forever! You go to Italy—I to France. We may never cross each other's paths again; but let us remember there is still another land where all may meet, and where partings come no more. There, *mon ami*," the white hand pointed upward, " is the true *patrie*. Farewell!"

She stooped, kissed the hand that lay cold and still in hers, and flitted from the room.

A subtile odor of perfume lingering behind—the echo of the softest, sweetest voice woman ever owned—were all that remained to him of the peerless Estelle.

He stood still—motionless as the marble against which he leaned—his face bowed upon his arm. Very mourn-

fully floated in the words of Leonie's song: "Love not! love not!" Oh, warning vainly said! The silvery moonlight streamed between the parted curtains—the house was very still. The song Mrs. Rutherford plaintively sung was the only sound to disturb Alwyn Bartram. He stood there mute, motionless; and if ever human suffering atoned for human sin, then he, Estella's husband, in that hour of supreme despair, had redeemed the past.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"POST TENEBRAS LUX!"

LATE in the afternoon of the second day, a carriage drew up before that shabby tenement house, where carriages were a dream and myth, and Mr. Bartram sprung out.

He ran up the stairs, and rapped at the door of his wife's room. There was no response. He rapped again—still silence. He turned the handle; the door was locked.

"The lady's gone."

It was the voice of the woman who before had admitted him. She came to the head of the stairs, and peered at him curiously.

"Goné!" he echoed, in amaze. "Gone where?"

The woman shook her head.

"I don't know, sir—she left no word. She came into my room, yesterday, and bid me good-bye, and told me, if a gentleman called, to tell him she had left for good. That's all I know, sir."

The woman disappeared. Alwyn Bartram leaned against the dirty, begrimed wall, sick at heart.

What did it mean? Was she mad? Why had she run away from him again?

"She pretended to love me," he thought, bitterly, "and she proved it—*thus!* But this time I will find her—this time she shall not baffle me! Poor child! she is afraid to trust me still."

He went out rapidly, re-entered the carriage, and was driven back to his hotel. As he entered, a waiter met him with a sealed note.

"Just been left, sir, by a servant in livery. I was about to bring it up to your room."

Mr. Bartram took it, and started visibly. Ah! he knew

that delicate Italian hand—that thick, perfumed, glittering paper—that proud old crest, and the motto beneath, “*Tiens ta foy.*”

What could Mlle. De Montreuil have to say to him *now?* He turned away and opened it. It was eminently brief:

“MONSIEUR,—Your wife is *here*. Come this evening, and receive her from my hand.

“ESTELLE.”

His wife with her! He crumpled the note fiercely in his palm.

“Are they both in league against me,” he thought, “that they are resolved to make it as bitter as they can? I am only human—they should not try me too far. But I will go—it will be something to look once more upon *her* beautiful face!”

As men on the verge of execution have stopped to make elaborate toilets, so on this last evening Alwyn Bartram stood before the glass, attiring himself as carefully as though the heart in his bosom did not lie like lead. He went through it mechanically, and his own haggard face, and hollow eyes, with the deep bistre tints beneath, told of the bitterness within, so bravely and silently endured.

It was nearly eight, and the silvery moonlight was flooding the city streets with indescribable glory, as he rang the door-bell of the French noble’s familiar mansion.

The servant who admitted him ushered him into the empty drawing-room, and went in search of his mistress.

He crossed over, and stood, as on that other night, leaning moodily against the chimney-piece, wondering vaguely which of them would come—his wife or Estelle, or both together.

As the thought crossed his mind, the door opened—he lifted his somber eyes, and beheld a radiant vision.

It was Estelle De Montreuil, and in the dress of a bride!

Her rich robe of dead-white silk swept the velvet carpet—diamonds blazed upon the beautiful bare neck and arms, and a crown of jeweled orange-blossoms sparkled on the shining hair. That lovely *chevelure* was no longer wreathed in a coronet of velvet braids around the regal head, but hung in glistening ringlets below the slender waist. Stately and beautiful as a young queen she stood before him, and yet in all her magnificence she had never reminded him so

vividly of simple little Estella as now. Those flowing curls were all that was needed to make the resemblance complete.

He stood and looked at her, dazed, stunned. Dressed as a bride—what did it mean?

"Monsieur stands entranced!" she said, gayly, coming forward. "Speechless with admiration, no doubt. How surprised you must have been this afternoon, upon receiving my note!"

"I have lived in a state of perpetual surprises of late," he answered; "the power to wonder at anything is fast leaving me. But if it is not impertinent, I should like to know what *that* dress means?"

"What it says—that I am a bride!"

He stood motionless as death.

"A bride!" he repeated, in a sort of whisper—"a bride!"

"A happy bride, monsieur!" She came close to him, the delicate cheeks flushed, the starry eyes shining. "But you—you do not ask for your wife, and I told you she was here."

That smile—that radiant face! Some dim perception of the glorious truth dawned upon him. He caught his breath, his brain turning giddy.

"For God's sake, speak!" he cried, hoarsely. "I think I am going mad!"

She held out both lovely hands—ringless save for one plain circlet of gold—the beautiful face luminous with love, and light, and joy.

"Nay, you are sane at last," she said. "Oh, Alwyn, Alwyn! don't you know me?"

And then the scales fell from his eyes, and he knew the truth—the bewildering, delirious truth! His wife stood before him!

"Estelle!"

He could utter no more—the room and everything in it was literally spinning round before the strong man's eyes.

"Estelle, no more—Estella Bartram, your wife! Oh, blind, blind, blind that you have been, not to have known long ago! Estelle De Montreuil no longer, but your little Essie, my darling husband, if you will forgive me and take me back!"

She threw herself upon his breast, in a sudden paroxysm

of womanly weeping, clinging to him with convulsive strength.

"At last, my husband, you love me—at last the pain, the misery, the long, lonely, dreary years of separation, are at an end! Oh, my darling—my darling! the dream of my life is won!"

He held her to him close—close. But he did not speak—he could not; his heart seemed ready to burst—full of an ecstasy that was nigh akin to pain. She lifted her lovely face, pale and tear-stained, in a piteous, childish appeal, that reminded him of the "Little Essie" of other days.

"You are not angry, Alwyn? Oh, speak to me—tell me you love me—tell me you are glad you have found your long-lost wife!"

"Glad!" he repeated—"glad! Oh, Estella! words are nothing—I *can not* say what is in my heart! I can only say, thank God!"

* * * * *

It was an hour later. Side by side on the sofa these re-united lovers sat, beginning to rationally realize their supreme bliss at last.

"How ten years must have altered me," Estella said, "since *you* did not know me! I have changed greatly, I know, in every respect, and I was not surprised that Leonie should not recognize me; but you—yes, I *did* think, Alwyn, you would know your wife."

"I always saw the resemblance," Alwyn answered, "and once the idea struck me that you might be my Estella, there were so many coincidences; but I drove the idea from me, as the maddest of mad romances. My little, pale, timid Essie had so little in common with this regally beautiful, this queenly Mademoiselle De Montreuil, with the best blood of France in her patrician veins, that I think even I may be pardoned for not recognizing you. But, Estella, *why* did you not tell me at once?"

"Ah, I am only a woman like the rest, and I *did* want my husband to love me!"

"Well, you speedily attained that wish, Heaven knows. Why did you not speak then?"

"Because, sir, you didn't deserve it, and revenge is sweet! I had suffered—I am not going to flatter your masculine vanity now by saying how much—and it was

only poetic justice that you should suffer, too. And it was so delightful—the idea of playing incognito—in seeing your infatuation, your hopeless infatuation, for your own wife—your despised little Essie! Besides, I had very serious doubts of you, monsieur. You were in love with Count De Montreuil's daughter, but supposing she accepted your love, and your runaway wife turned up, how would you act? Alwyn, if you had done other than as you have done, you would never have known me! I would have gone back to France, and never looked upon your face again. But principle conquered passion—you nobly redeemed the past, and made me too happy for words to tell."

There was an eloquent silence, and Mr. Bartram kissed his wife. Then—

"Does the count know?" he inquired.

"I told him to-day. You should have seen his face, Alwyn; and Leonie's, for of course I told her too." She laughed merrily at the recollection. "Poor Leonie! I don't think she will return with us to Paris. Ever since I let the murder out, she has shut herself up in her room *en penitence*. But I don't despair of her ultimate recovery."

"Neither do I," said Mr. Bartram, rather cynically. "We don't break our hearts in these latter days. But, Essie, look here—how did you manage the other night, when indulging in your private theatricals? I left you behind me in the tenement house, and I found you here before me, elaborately dressed, upon my arrival. Explain that little circumstance, madame."

"It is very easily explained," was the answer. "You walked, and it took you fully an hour. I rode, and it did not take me quarter that time. The carriage was waiting for me in the next street, and as for my toilet, I possess a maid who is past-mistress of her art. I am afraid it was rather silly, all that acting, but I know I enjoyed it thoroughly, and you deserved the punishment. How delightfully miserable you looked!"

"You heartless Xantippe! But the time of retribution has come; you shall be paid back in your own coin. Oh, Estella, Estella!" with a sudden change of voice, a sudden, passionate clasping to his heart—"is this all an enchanting dream? Will I ever be able to realize my great bliss? What have I done to be so blessed?"

She lay on his broad, true breast, pale from very excess of joy.

"We need the discipline," she murmured. "We will be all the happier in the future for the sorrow of the past. Estella and her husband will never doubt each other more."

* * * * *

Three days later, Count De Montreuil, his daughter, and his daughter's husband, sailed for France. Mrs. Rutherford declined being one of the party, and remained in New York.

The romantic story got wind at once, of course, and was the nine-days' wonder of the city. The people talked of it, the papers teemed with it; it created a *furore* unprecedented. But Estella and her husband were far away on the "heaving sea," and all their new celebrity fell harmless.

Mr. George Waldron pulled his tawny mustache, and looked plaintive.

"It is better to be born lucky than rich. My grandmother used to say so; and gad! I believe the old lady was right. To think of the luck that fellow Bartram has come to, while better men go begging! The women *always* adored him; his pictures sell like wildfire; two fortunes fall to him together; and now a third, and the loveliest wife under the starry sky. By Jove! it's enough to make a man go and cut his throat."

THE END.

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